



Secret Shopper Project Final Report



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Disclaimer

This study was conducted by the PPMC at Wichita State University (WSU). The PPMC is an independent research body unaffiliated with the American Job Center. This report was prepared by the research team. It represents the findings, views, opinions, and conclusions of the research team alone. The report does not express the official or unofficial policy of WSU.

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Executive Summary

Background

The Greater Lincoln Workforce Development Board sought input from key stakeholder groups to better understand the effectiveness of the American Job Center (AJC) and Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title 1B programs. From March through August of 2021, the Public Policy and Management Center (PPMC) at Wichita State University (WSU) completed an evaluation of American Job Center (AJC) for Lancaster and Saunders Counties located in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Methodology

The evaluation of the AJC included five content areas.

1. Secret Shopper Evaluation

During this evaluation, the PPMC coordinated 14 secret shopper evaluations. Shoppers represented diverse ages, races, job experiences and education levels, and included veterans and persons with disabilities. Each shopper used a unique “script” developed to represent different segments of the population that access services from Workforce centers. The purpose of the secret shopper

evaluations was to provide an unbiased view of the services provided by the AJC and to better understand barriers encountered by job seekers.

2. American Job Center Best Practices

Literature reviews were completed regarding environment and space recommendations to best serve the needs of the AJC and best practices for service delivery including examples of innovative programming.

3. Workforce System Evaluation

The PPMC sought feedback from current AJC employees. In order to gather this feedback, the AJC hosted an employee focus group and launched an electronic survey. The purpose of the focus group and survey were to engage with employees to understand what is working well at the AJC and in what areas are improvements needed. Partners of the AJC were separately interviewed by the PPMC. The purpose of the interviews was to listen to the partners, understand the effectiveness of the partnership and identify opportunities for strengthening the AJC's services.

4. Business Evaluation

The PPMC hosted business partner focus groups. The purpose of the focus group was to engage with business partners on their knowledge, utilization, and engagement with the AJC.

5. Job Seeker Evaluation

Job Seeker focus groups were also held. The purpose of the focus groups was to engage with job seekers regarding their experience accessing services from the AJC.

Summary of Findings

It is apparent that the AJC has a wide range of services available to assist job seekers and employers. These services are a critical piece of the workforce system. For job seekers, the AJC can assist people in job preparation, interview skills, training/re-training, finding employment, and accessing other available services. For businesses, the AJC can assist with finding qualified workers, training employees, providing labor market information, and access to other available services. However, the findings from this study show a clear disconnect between the services available and awareness and access to the services.

Overall Recommendations

Based on the information collected, opportunities for growth and suggestions for ways to address challenges were compiled. The following recommendations are based on data collected from all content areas. A complete description of the recommendations can be found on page 81.

1. Enhance Customer Service Focus and Training
2. Increase Awareness of Available Services
3. Develop Consistent Intake and Follow-up Processes
4. Look for Opportunities to Provide Innovative Services
5. Enhance Partnerships with Partner Agencies and Local Businesses
6. Address Location Limitations
7. Implement a Contract Management Processes
8. Find Creative Ways to Address NEworks Usability Concerns



Overall Recommendations

1. Enhance Customer Service Focus and Training

The feedback from the evaluators provides important insights regarding the need for an enhanced customer service focus and targeted training for employees. Although the direct work with job seekers is done through a third-party contractor, the AJC should consider how a customer service focus is integrated into the screening and hiring process for new staff. Behavior-based interview questions, role-playing exercises, and scenario screening questions are important ways to identify that “service” focus in employees. Once hired, employees should be provided with expectations to set the tone for professionalism of the center. Simple things like wearing name badges or having employee name placards on workspaces can assist in this process.

Second, the AJC should implement an enhanced customer service training for staff by utilizing best practices. Recommended focuses include practicing customer service empathy, working with people who have physical and learning disabilities, evaluating and addressing the needs of veterans, working with individuals speaking English as a second language, and participating in diversity training. In addition, training – including

opportunities to practice the skills learned – on handling customer complaints and eliciting information from job seekers. This will build skills and confidence in employees so that they can better understand each job seeker's individual needs.

Third, the feedback from staff indicated that they want to provide exceptional customer service. The AJC can assist by providing tools to assist employees. Some ideas include providing cross training, so that employees understand all services available and have handouts or easy access to descriptions of the services. Another simple idea is to allow staff to practice using the telephonic translation service, so they feel comfortable using it when needed.

Lastly, customer service is everybody's job—not just the front line. Developing training for managers on how to observe customer service skills regularly and promote a customer service focus in all employees is critical. In addition, ensuring managers have the tools to evaluate and reward positive customer service skills is important. In this time of financial austerity, developing reward and recognition efforts beyond financial incentives is critical for keeping quality employees.

2. Increase Awareness of Available Services

Across the board, feedback from each group contacted as part of this assessment indicated that there is a lack of knowledge regarding the services available. To best use resources that result in employment for job seekers and meeting the workforce needs of employers, it is important that all available services are utilized to their full extent.

To utilize services fully, it is important that staff are aware of all the services available and how to assist customers in accessing those services. Ensuring each employee has baseline knowledge about the services available is a place to start. Including easy access to more specific service information and streamlining referrals for services would also assist in this endeavor. A customer should leave a center with more information and support services than they could have obtained from the website alone. This starts with well-trained employees.

Another suggestion is to provide improved resources regarding services to job seekers. Also have easy to understand resources available both in-person and online. Staff should be trained to ask questions in order to fully understand the needs of job seekers. Then, implement a process that allows employees to make connections to the available resources. Advertise services more broadly, so that potential job seekers (not just those who are unemployed) are aware of the available services.

In addition, potential employers are not aware of the services available. Strategically reach out to businesses and cultivate relationships. Provide information to employers regarding the services available, and how the AJC can be a resource to them.

3. Develop Consistent Intake and Follow-up Processes

Evaluators and job seekers indicated that there is a lack of consistency in the intake process. Some individuals completed a lengthy intake process, while others were directed to simply use the computers to search for jobs online. Developing a consistent and friendly intake processes allows for “best practices” to be utilized with each client. To achieve this, written processes and expectations should be developed, and training conducted with all staff on these intake processes.

Any opportunities to streamline services should be considered. This includes an intake process which allows customers to complete information needed for multiple programs (WIOA, NEworks, etc.) prior to being referred to other staff members in the Center. Additionally, creating a formal referral process with seamless co-enrollment for programs (as available) would assist in improving the flow of services for the customer. Improvements could also be made in establishing a process for following up with customers to provide information regarding resources, training, and services (ex. interview prep sessions, resume writing services, etc.). The process should include a short timeframe to follow-up (example: 24-48 hours after customer is in the Center). Feedback indicated that some people were told there would be follow-up, but others

were not. If follow-up did occur, it ranged from a couple of days to three weeks from the initial appointment. Following a schedule would avoid any ambiguity regarding when job seekers can expect to hear back from the Center.

4. Look for Opportunities to Provide Innovative Services

The world around us is ever changing. The ways that people both look for jobs and the ways that businesses look for employees are shifting. Additionally, the jobs available are different than they were just five years ago. The AJC should look for ways to be innovative in the services they offer as well. This includes things like working with partners to identify virtual services that can be available when in-person providers are not on-site. Another suggestion is to use existing resources in a new way, such as using the computers in the resource room as a testing site for businesses. Also, the AJC could look for ways to provide in-person training sessions to assist job seekers with other skills needed to be successful in a job in today's work environment beyond resume writing and interview skills.

5. Enhance Partnerships with Partner Agencies and Local Businesses

The AJC has room for improvement in their work with both partner agencies and local businesses in order to better meet the community needs.

To improve the work with partner agencies, finding ways to measure success is an important first step. It may be helpful to identify appropriate data needed for measuring success and to identify how data is used. By working towards a better understanding of the way the partnership serves both parties, it may create increased buy-in from staff on both sides. This will help in making accurate referrals which will improve the success of the services offered. In addition, providing information, training, or workshops to partners so that they are aware of the menu of services available at AJC may help better align the services offered.

Staff assisting businesses note that there is very little promotion of services for business customers, and businesses reported they were not aware of the existence of the AJC or the services available. Many businesses misunderstood the AJC as an unemployment office. Additionally, businesses reported that a lack of applicants qualified to fill available positions is a growing concern. Businesses indicated this decline in qualified applicants and the fact that they are getting better applicant response through social media and other online resources (i.e. Indeed, Glassdoor) as reasons that they do not use the AJC to find applicants.

It may be helpful to conduct a business needs assessment to identify services beneficial to businesses. Implementing consistent communication and outreach to businesses would also help to strengthen and build relationships. This could be done by creating a business engagement list with contact information and assigning AJC business representatives to engage businesses. Another idea is to establish an in-person meeting schedule with businesses to understand their needs and partner around services. Even through simple things, such as creating marketing materials that provide businesses with AJC service information and partnering with groups, such as the Chamber, to interact with businesses may go a long way to improving and building mutually beneficial relationships.

6. Address Location Limitations

The location of the AJC was frequently mentioned as an area of concern. There are some immediate changes to the current physical location that could be made in order to improve access. Examples include improve signage both inside and outside the building; provide information on the website about how to access location; provide information on website on parking options; and address bathroom access issues.

Longer term planning for a new space should take into consideration the items included in this report as well as issues mentioned by participants. Participants suggested creating a waiting room space where customers can sit down while waiting for services,

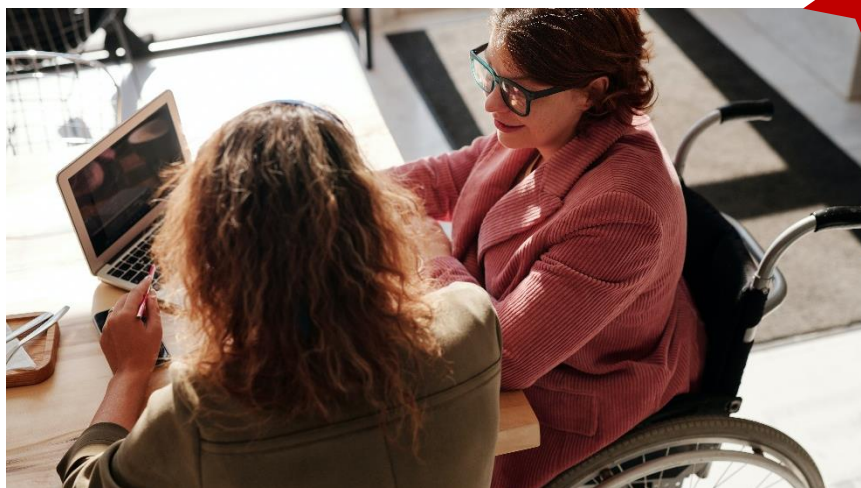
providing seating options in offices/cubicle spaces for customers to meet with staff, and creating spaces so that customers can talk to staff in a confidential manner. Overall, it will be important that the feedback collected as part of this assessment is considered when designing the new location of the AJC.

7. Implement Contract Management Processes

The AJC in Lincoln is operated by a third-party contractor. Many of the issues raised by participants in this study related to the services directly provided by the contractor. In order to improve accountability and service delivery there are some recommendations regarding overall contract management. The first step is to create a bi-annual or annual contract evaluation process. This process can be used to ensure that the contractor is meeting expectations and adapting to needs. The next step is to provide employees with a clear understanding of the management structure of the AJC and the Workforce Board. This overview should include how the different parts work together to meet the needs of job seekers. Employees indicated that the system seems disjointed; by improving their understanding of the system, they may be better suited to work within it. Participants also suggested internal communication processes, specifically between the contractor and the Board. There are situations and needs where decisions must be made outside of the contractor's immediate control. Streamlined communication would allow for these situations to be addressed in a timely manner to meet needs as they arise.

8. Find Creative Ways to Address NEworks Usability Concerns

Each of the groups contacted mentioned suggestions for improvement in NEworks. While the AJC in Lincoln likely has very little control over NEworks or its operation, there are ways in which they could assist with usability. Ideas include providing clear navigation instructions to users, including job seekers and employers; promoting the benefits of NEworks to employers; and providing NEworks workshops for job seekers.



Secret Shopper Evaluation

Background

From March through May 2020, the PPMC coordinated 14 secret shopper evaluations at the AJC in Lincoln. Shoppers represented diverse ages, races, job experiences, and education levels, and included veterans and persons with disabilities. Each shopper used a unique “script” developed to represent different segments of the population that access services from Workforce centers. A full description of Shopper Scenarios can be found in Attachment A.

Methodology

On average, the shoppers spent four to five hours participating in project orientation and training. This training included script and scenario development individualized for each shopper, online application training, role-playing rehearsal, and overview of the Workforce delivery system. Shoppers were also trained on consistent and reliable use of the evaluation tool and participated in a pilot evaluation.

PPMC staff worked closely with the AJC project team to identify customer categories or roles that represent the diverse cross-section of customers that the AJC serves. The following scenarios were identified:

- Unemployed single parent with limited skills and employment history
- Recent high school graduate/current college student looking for part-time employment (at-risk youth)
- Person experiencing homelessness (2)
- Person recently dislocated looking for trade skills and career change (2)
- Person of color who is underemployed and looking for trade skills and career change (2)
- Person speaking English as a second language (2)
- Veteran with past criminal history
- Veteran seeking part-time employment and job training
- Person with a disability (2)

The PPMC identified shoppers to best fit each scenario. Visits were staggered to ensure unique interactions. The shoppers did not disclose their role or the intent of their involvement to AJC staff during their visits.

Using smart-phones or tablets, shoppers completed a web-based assessment immediately following their visit. The same assessment was used by every shopper. Quantitative and qualitative information was collected from each shopper. At the end of the project, a group debriefing session was conducted with all shoppers to identify comparative information about their AJC visits.

Shoppers Perceptions of Services

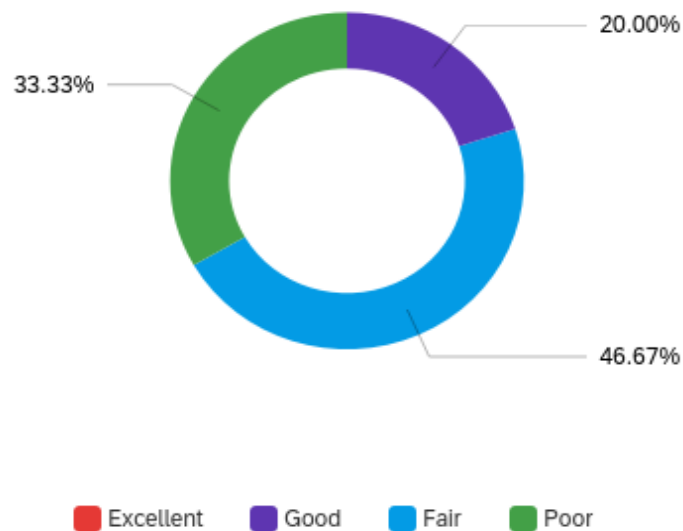
The ultimate goal of the Workforce centers is to provide all clients the tools and opportunity to secure and maintain gainful employment. Evaluators were encouraged to keep that overall goal in mind and evaluate if they would feel supported and equipped to

find desired employment after interacting with the center. Evaluators were encouraged to provide objective assessments of their experience at the AJC.

Knowledgeable Responses

Shoppers were asked to rate staff's ability to help solve their employment problem when they first entered the AJC (See Figure 1.1). Twenty percent (20%) responded "Good," and 80% responded "Fair" or "Poor."

Figure 1.1: Explanation of Process to Receive Services



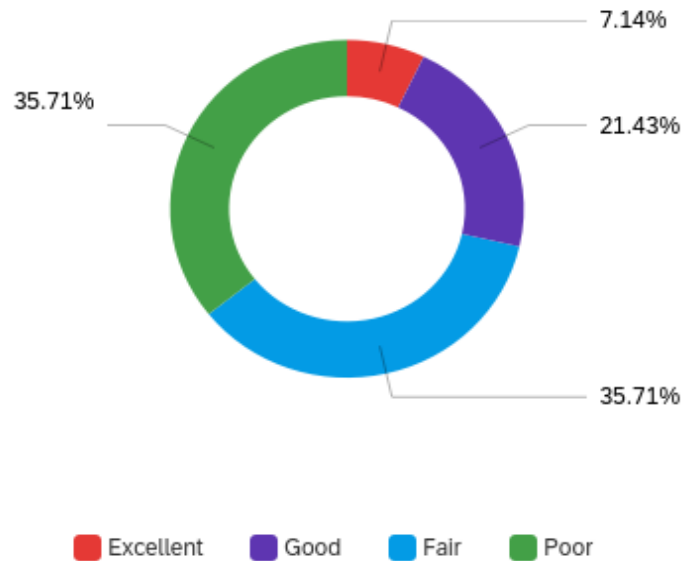
Selected comments include:

- Staff did come around and ask if I needed anything. She had to ask someone else, but never returned.
- I want to be clear - if I was not aware of the programs available and had not pushed her, I would have been in the center for a total of 5 minutes and left feeling very disappointed. The overall initial impression was that because I had a job, they had nothing to offer, and I didn't actually need help.
- I was told to better determine what career I want, and then should reach out
- I think staff had the ability to help. They did not offer to help.

Processes for Receiving Services

Shoppers were asked to rate their perceptions of the AJC representative's overall understanding of their employment problem or situation. As shown in Figure 1.2, 29% of shoppers said "Excellent" or "Good," and 71% indicated "Fair" or "Poor."

Figure 1.2: Understanding of Employment Problem



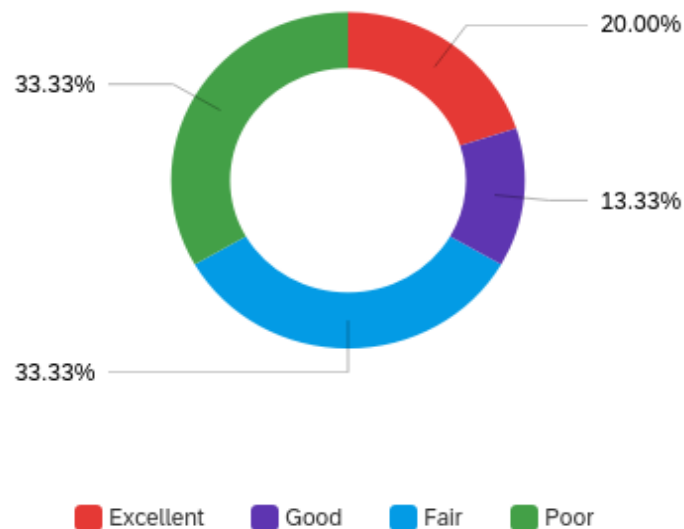
Selected comments include:

- Today is my second time coming to receive the orientation. They are friendly and enthusiastic to help and answer all my questions.
- They seemed put out by my presence. First thing that she said was, "We are not a staffing agency." But she continued to talk after I pushed her about things [that] they had available to help people find a job when they do not know what they would be good at and don't currently make enough to make ends meet.
- I was then told to sit at one of the open computer stations. I asked whether the computer was logged in and ready to use, trying to let them know I had never used their system before. I was not asked any questions or given any instructions on the use of the computer and program.

Courtesy

As shown in Figure 1.3, a third (33%) of shoppers rated the courtesy of staff interactions as “Excellent” or “Good,” and two thirds (67%) rated courtesy as “Fair” or “Poor.”

Figure 1.3: Courtesy



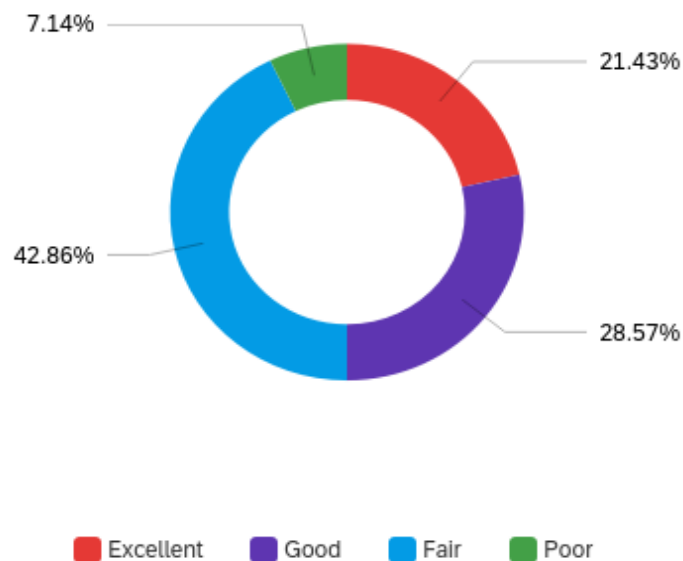
Selected comments include:

- She could not have been more attentive, and actually left for a few minutes to talk to a colleague and came back with some great part time job opportunities. She also informed me of an upcoming Job Fair that she encouraged me to consider attending.
- She was courteous when she asked whether I was doing OK. This staff member also did well interacting with other consumers.
- Not greeted upon entering. Person at desk just stared at me as if I was interrupting.
- To myself they were kind helpful. I witnessed one representative who seemed annoyed and agitated and being somewhat mean and loud with an older Asian American woman snapping at her when she was trying to get help getting to her resume on the computer.

Listening

Shoppers were asked to evaluate their perceptions of how well staff listened to their problem (Figure 1.4). Half of the shoppers (50%) reported their representative's listening skills as "Excellent" or "Good," and half (50%) rated listening as "Fair" or "Poor."

Figure 1.4: Staff Listening



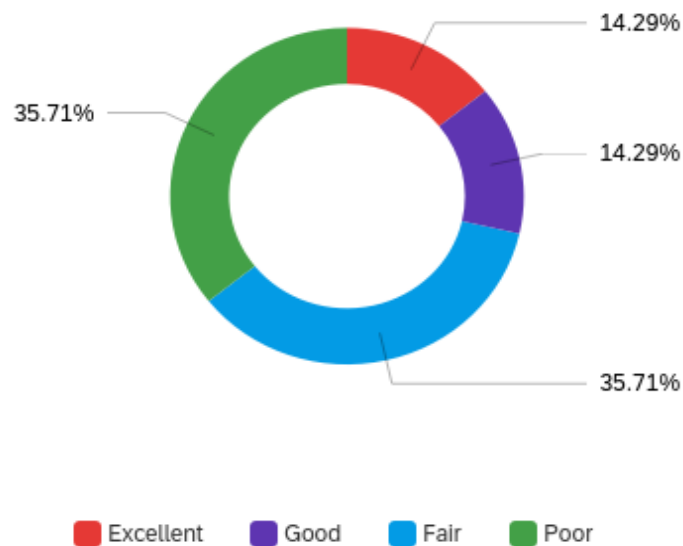
Selected comments included:

- She did listen when I was able to explain why I was there.
- The representative was good. She led me to NE Labor, where I spoke with another staff member about resume and interview assistance. I was told to call AJC back and ask for another staff member about interview help.
- We talked about my reasons for a few minutes, but [she] understood the story I told her and quickly moved on to conversation about what kind of job I was looking for.
- They are listening, but they are not really connecting all my needs with all resources the center has to actually make it happen.

Encouragement in Job Search and Ability to Help

Shoppers were asked to rate their perceptions about the ability of the AJC representative to help in their job search (Figure 1.5). Almost 29% of shoppers report that they felt confident, but 71% did not feel very confident.

Figure 1.5: Ability to Help



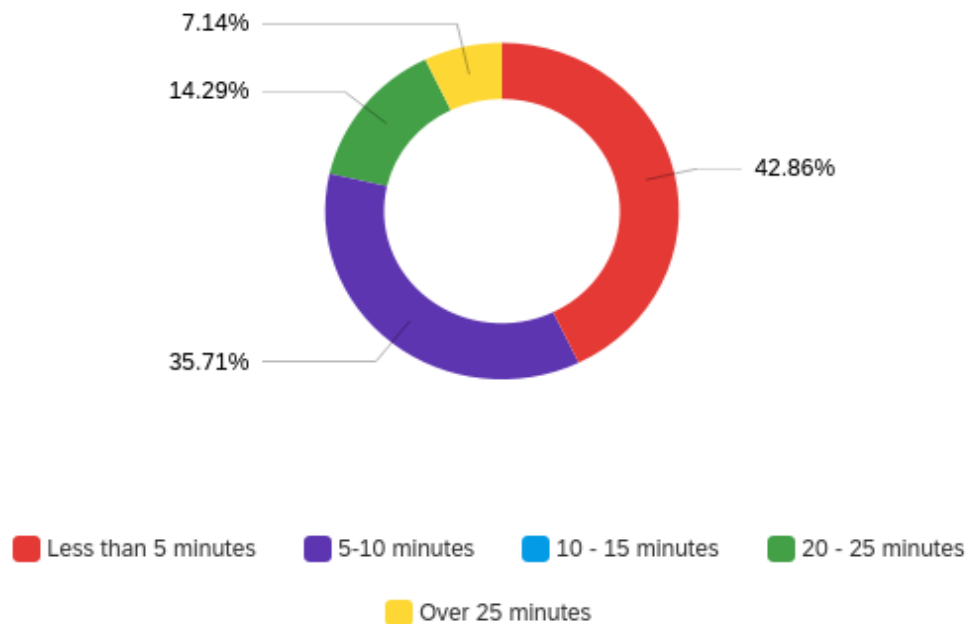
Comments included:

- Based on my experience, after she determined that I knew something about their services offered, she was able to at least tell me about some of the programs.
- I called and received a recording. [I] left a message which has not been returned. I asked the same question (about a resume workshop) in-person and still received no answer.
- She should make the person who steps into the center feel like they got to the right place. I did not feel that. (I even re-looked to make sure I'm in the right suite).

Wait Time

As shown in Figure 1.6, shoppers were generally satisfied with their initial wait time for service. Almost 43% indicated that their wait time was less than five minutes, while about 36% waited five to ten minutes. Two shoppers (14%) waited 10 to 15 minutes, and one shopper (7%) waited over 25 minutes.

Figure 1.6: Wait Times



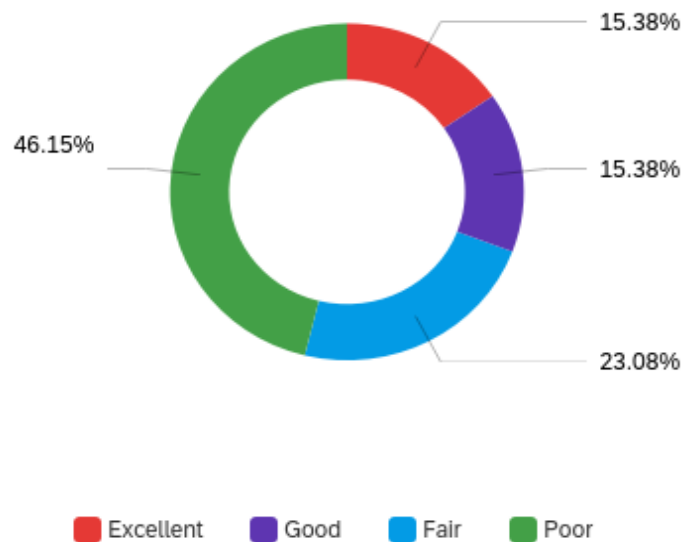
Selected comments included:

- She greeted me right away.
- Waited to get access to computer without station number. I had to ask where they wanted me to go; she told me to go to computer with "X" on the floor, which I could not see from reception area.
- To explain, I was directed to a computer station right away. Twenty-two minutes later I was asked whether I was doing OK. Ten minutes after that I was asked to verify my name and SSN. I then sat looking at job postings for another 38 minutes with no staff approaching me, and I left.

Wait Time Follow-up

Shoppers were less satisfied with wait time follow-up (Figure 1.7). Two shoppers (15%) rated follow-up “Excellent,” and two shoppers (15%) rated it “Good.” Three (23%) rated follow-up “Fair,” and six (27%) rated it “Poor.”

Figure 1.7: Wait Time Follow-up



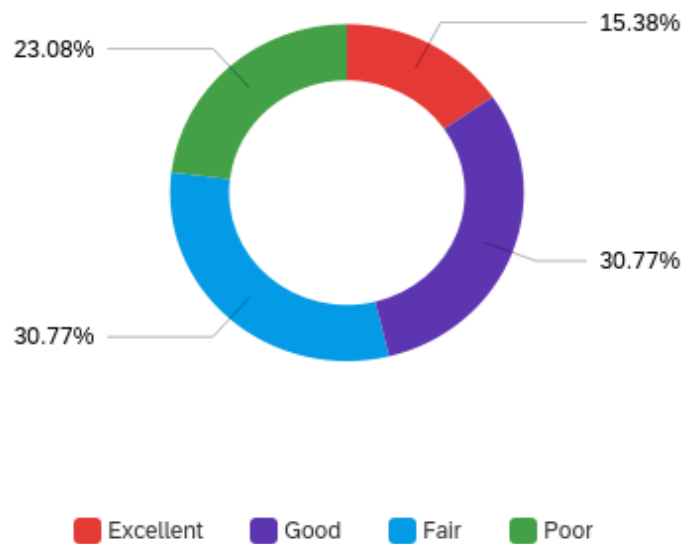
Selected comments included:

- Waited quietly. No seating area. Stood by front desk waiting
- I did not have an initial wait time. However, after I was sent to the computer, no one checked on me. I had to go back up to the desk each time I had an issue or a question.
- There was no follow-up in room 205.

Receptionist Interaction

As shown in Figure 1.8, shoppers were asked to rate their interactions with the receptionist. Almost half of the shoppers (46%) rated the receptionist's interaction as "Excellent" or "Good." The remaining shoppers (54%) rated interaction as "Fair" or "Poor."

Figure 1.8: Receptionist Interaction



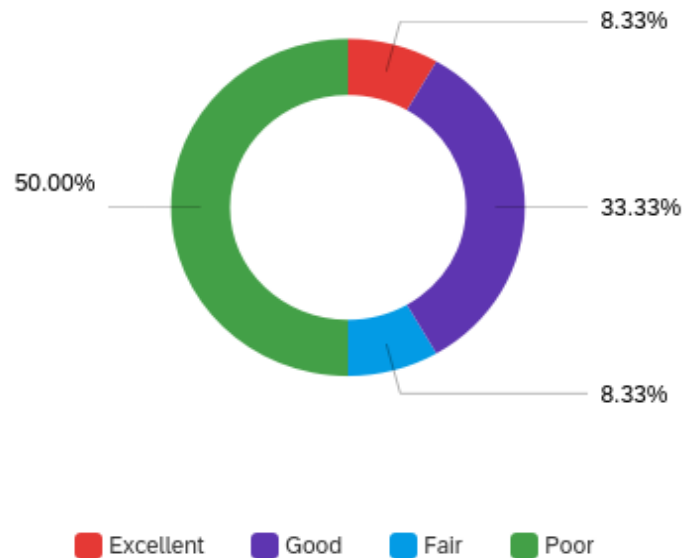
Selected comments included:

- I did see improvement here. A family with a language barrier came and received patient help as they called someone on their phone to interpret.
- The receptionist in room 222 was excellent.
- Assuming the person who helped me was the only receptionist, she was kind and prompt with those she could help. If the other staff member was a receptionist, she was not effective at all.

Creation of NEworks Account

Shoppers were asked to rate how helpful staff was in assisting with the creation of a NEworks account (Figure 1.9). One shopper (8%) rated help “Excellent,” and four shoppers (33%) found help to be “Good.” Almost 60 percent (58%) were dissatisfied with help received.

Figure 1.9: Help with NEworks Account



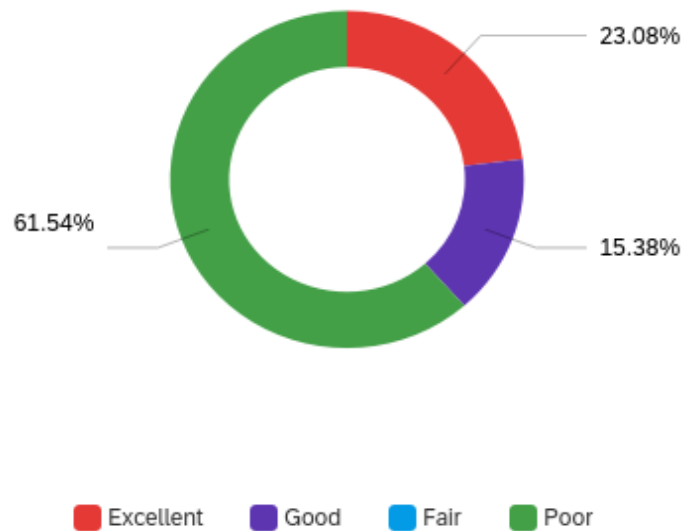
Selected comments included:

- Staff came over twice to see if I needed any help.
- They gave me a sticky note with the info and told me to do it at home on my computer before they could help me.
- The staff didn't guide me to sign up on NEworks at first. She introduced me [to the] Indeed website.
- It seems I had created an account 6 years ago, but staff helped me fill in the blank areas and update the others. We even were able to recover the old password and changed it.

Encouragement about Job Search

Shoppers were asked to evaluate their perceptions about how encouraging staff were about their job search and employment potential (Figure 1.10). Three shoppers (24%) gave “Excellent” ratings, and two (15%) rated the experience “Good.” Eight shoppers (62%) rated the encouragement “Poor.”

Figure 1.10: Encouragement about Job Search and Employment Potential



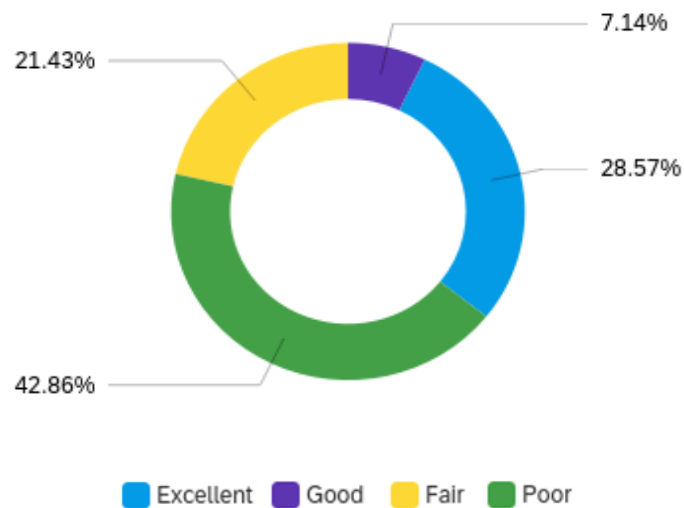
Selected comments included:

- They gave me some useful advice.
- I left confident that there were available jobs - in fact was encouraged to call about one that same day.
- Staff gave me some encouragement in the context of assessing my skeletal resume.
- Staff were no help. It felt as if the system is set up and clients are expected to navigate it. This system is not bad, but [oftentimes] it felt like I needed a secret code.
- The only thing I knew when I left was that “Lori” would be reaching out within a few days and I should have my documents ready. Even though I did not know what documents I needed.

Referral Services

As shown in Figure 1.11, shoppers were asked about the referral services they received. Four shoppers (29%) reported the referral services were “Excellent,” and one shopper (7%) rated services as “Good.” Three shoppers rated services “Fair” (21%), and six shoppers (43%) rated services “Poor.”

Figure 1.11: Referral Services



Selected comments included:

- [I] was given a verbal and physical list and, candidly, had no idea that all of these services were available in Lincoln and basically under one roof. In these tough COVID times, and being a near lifetime Lincoln resident, [it] makes me proud that as a community we do know how to extend helping hands.
- VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Education, WIOA, resume writing, virtual job fair flyer, links to 5 current job leads, and links to Facebook jobs. They also sent my information to the WIOA representative, and I was contacted by them on Wednesday.
- When I clicked on Veteran Services it took me to a completely different site. I did not need VA services, I needed to be directly connected to the job center veteran services.

- When I tried to ask again to have an interpreter for me, she [gave] me the phone number of community cultural center and asked me [to] call them. I called but no Vietnamese agent available at that time.

Information about Resources

As shown in Figure 1.12, shoppers were asked to rate the job tool and resources available at the AJC. Four (31%) of the 14 shoppers rated the tools and resources of the AJC as “Excellent” for their job search. There were no “Good” ratings. Three shoppers (23%) rated resources as “Fair,” and six shoppers (26%) thought resources were “Poor.”

Figure 1.12: Job Search Resources



Selected comments included:

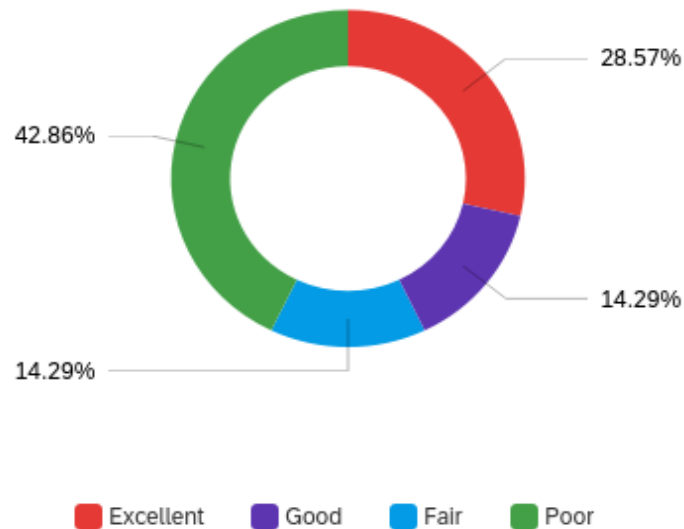
- I looked at the website and other tools available and believe the tools and resources are beneficial. I could not access any of them without [an] account.
- Besides some benefits from the website, I feel satisfied with their friendly help from the Orientation Staff.

- A staff member said she would send me information about materials at a later date. Since I was in line [behind 11 others], she was uncertain when she could address my situation again. It could be weeks, she said.
- Not mentioned at all.

Staff Knowledgeable Responses to Questions

Shoppers were asked to rate the knowledge of the staff when answering questions (Figure 1.13). Four shoppers (29%) found staff to be “Excellent” in answering their questions, while two shoppers (14%) reported “Good” ratings. Eight shoppers (57%) reported “Fair” or “Poor” knowledgeability of staff.

Figure 1.13: Staff Knowledgeable Responses to Questions



Selected comments included:

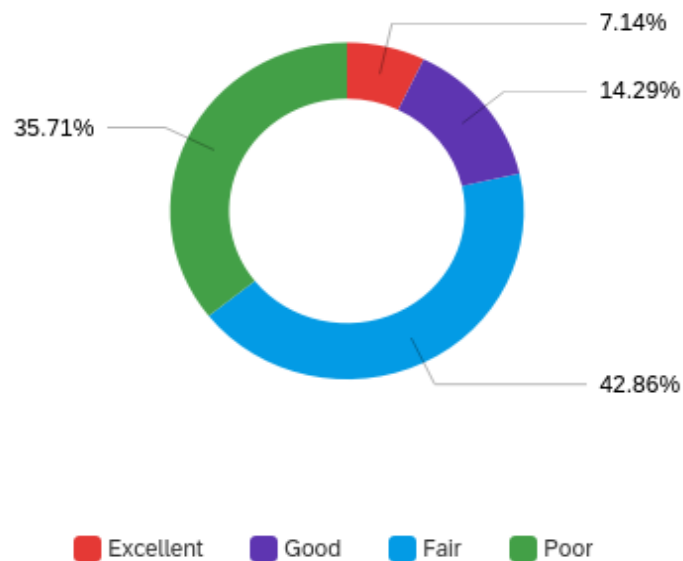
- I even threw in questions about helping my husband since I am 100% disabled and they stated they could do that! I was not aware of that resource.
- I highly evaluate the Orientation Staff that they are experienced & [knowledgeable]
- Again - they were answered but only after asked several different ways and [with] prompting.

- They did alright, but the staffer whom I spoke to simply wanted me to come to them once I knew the career I wanted to pursue.

Positive Atmosphere of American Job Center

Shoppers were asked to assess the overall sense or atmosphere of the AJC during their visits (Figure 1.14). One shopper (7%) found the atmosphere “Excellent” and two (14%) rated it “Good.” Six shoppers reported a “Fair” atmosphere and five (36%) found it “Poor.”

Figure 1.14: Positive Overall Atmosphere



Selected comments included:

- I did not feel negative, but I did not see any active energy going on in the center.
- As I would hope to find. Adequate but do not communicate resources are being spent on facilities, rather professionals ready and able to help.
- They were rude to the man that came in after me today who spoke a different language and was very dark. It made me sad for him.
- I left feeling defeated. My confidence was bruised, and it felt like I had wasted my time.

Environmental Factors

Shoppers were asked to observe and evaluate the environmental factors in the AJC. The quality and comfort of seating were found to be satisfactory, receiving an “Excellent” or “Good” rating (Table 1.1). Shoppers were divided on satisfaction with the quality of seating. Half (50%) rated it “Excellent” or “Good,” and half (50%) felt it was “Fair” or “Poor.” Almost two-thirds of shoppers felt the seating comfort was “Fair” or “Poor.” One shopper (7%) rated it “Excellent,” and four shoppers rate seating comfort as “Good.” Two-thirds (64%) of shopper found the facility clean, and about one-third (36%) rated cleanliness as “Fair.”

Half of the shoppers (50%) found computers without a significant wait time, and half (50%) rated computer availability “Fair” or “Poor.” All the shoppers found the computers were working.

Table 1.1: Environmental Factors

Question	Poor		Fair		Good		Excellent	
Quantity of seating	14.29%	2	35.71%	5	42.86%	6	7.14%	1
Comfort of seating	21.43%	3	42.86%	6	28.57%	4	7.14%	1
Cleanliness of facility	-	0	35.71%	5	57.14%	8	7.14%	1
Computers were available without wait	14.29%	2	35.71%	5	35.71%	5	14.29%	2
Computers were working	-	0	35.71%	5	35.71%	5	28.57%	4
Office was easy to locate	35.71%	5	57.14%	8	-	0	7.14%	1
Parking was adequate	14.29%	2	71.43%	10	-	0	14.29%	2

Selected environmental observations included:

- The desks were clean and ready to be used. The room was light, and walls were painted a light or white color. There were boards [where] notices and resources were posted, and they were not cluttered.
- The room is quite small but clean and supplied enough hand hygiene [products].
- Parking was awful, I had to park in the garage. Google maps took me to the location in front, where there was no parking. In terms of finding the actual office, that was not any better. The front door was locked (due to COVID), and the sign was hidden with other signs to enter through the alleyway.
- The bathroom usage is very uncomfortable. If someone approaches the desk, then staff yells that they are going to the restroom. No one needs to be put on the spot like that. This procedure brought back memories of kindergarten. As adults under the pressure of looking for work or filing for unemployment, they should not feel embarrassed by having natural needs met.
- The counter of the receptionist needs to be re-designed (such as the seat chair for the customers) so that they will feel comfortable and [can easily] ask the questions and share their problems which is also the reason [they're] coming to the center.

Impact on Job Search Strategies

Shoppers were asked if the services that they received at the AJC helped increase their awareness about methods to search for a job. They reported that NEworks was helpful, but the information provided in the workshops was the same information they found on NEworks. One shopper noted “They showed me how to avoid scammers and go directly to the employer’s website to search for more suitable jobs.” The flyers were also noted as informative.

Not all shoppers felt they received benefits. One noted: “While staff was good at explaining about their services, it did not help increase your awareness of strategies for finding a job.”

Impact on Awareness of Improvements to Strengthen Job Search

Shoppers were asked to document help they received from staff in improving or strengthening their job search. One shopper noted, "Since I had no idea where to begin, they were a big help." Another said, "No not really. But staff helped me narrow down the steps to take such as, looking for a specific type of job or area." Another comment noted, "AJC was not at all helpful but DOL receptionist at DOL was very helpful."

Follow-up Contacts

Shoppers were asked to record if they knew who to contact if they had additional questions. Several shoppers noted receiving follow-up information. For example, "I was given business cards from both staff members and email contact for the WIOA program. Made an appointment with staff to work on a resume." Another shopper noted, "Yes, but only after asking. I was given the business card for a different staff member at the center." Some shoppers noted less successful follow-up, "No, I was waiting on someone to contact me. She did call me three weeks after my meeting." About five shoppers noted that no workshops or follow-up was offered.

Workshops

Shoppers were asked if the recommendations they received were practical to implement in their job search process. About half of the shoppers attended a workshop. One shopper said, "They did do the orientation the same day I was there, which was helpful. However, I got done and thought - Ok, now I wait for them to call."

Another shared, "Yes and no. I think the workshop provided practical tools but because it is so practical, so it becomes generic. I did not feel I learn something new during the workshop (in term of new strategies to look for a new job)."

A third shopper noted, "Yes, in that approaching UNL TRIO was feasible. No, in that I was discouraged from business as a career, and music performance as a major, and

not given specific next steps to find work to eliminate debt besides determining a long-term career.”

Shoppers were asked if the workshops provided more resources than they could find on their own. They appreciated having many resources co-located. One shopper noted, “Many resources were available from one portal. I would have needed to search many different sites to find the same resources.” Another noted, “I had very little idea of all that is out there, they gave me several websites along with the latest virtual job fair link.”

Shoppers were asked if the information provided helped them feel better prepared for a job search. Two shoppers had very positive comments including, “Since I truly had no idea where to begin, they helped me get started and assured me they would be there if I had any questions.” Another said, “Yes, it did. Through the workshop, [I] know some sources to be prepared for my plan of working and studying. I feel very satisfied.”

Approximately eight shoppers commented that they were not offered a workshop or that the information was not very helpful. Comments included, “Unfortunately not. In fact, I left feeling like maybe they couldn't help or I shouldn't be using their services. Much of the orientation was heavily focused on ‘UPTO.... \$xx’ - meaning up to a specific amount of help, only if I ‘need’ it. Also – ‘IF YOU QUALIFY’, as if I did not need the services because I have a job.” Another shopper said, “Marginally. Flyers in DOJ waiting area were helpful but lack of assistance from AJC was unacceptable.”

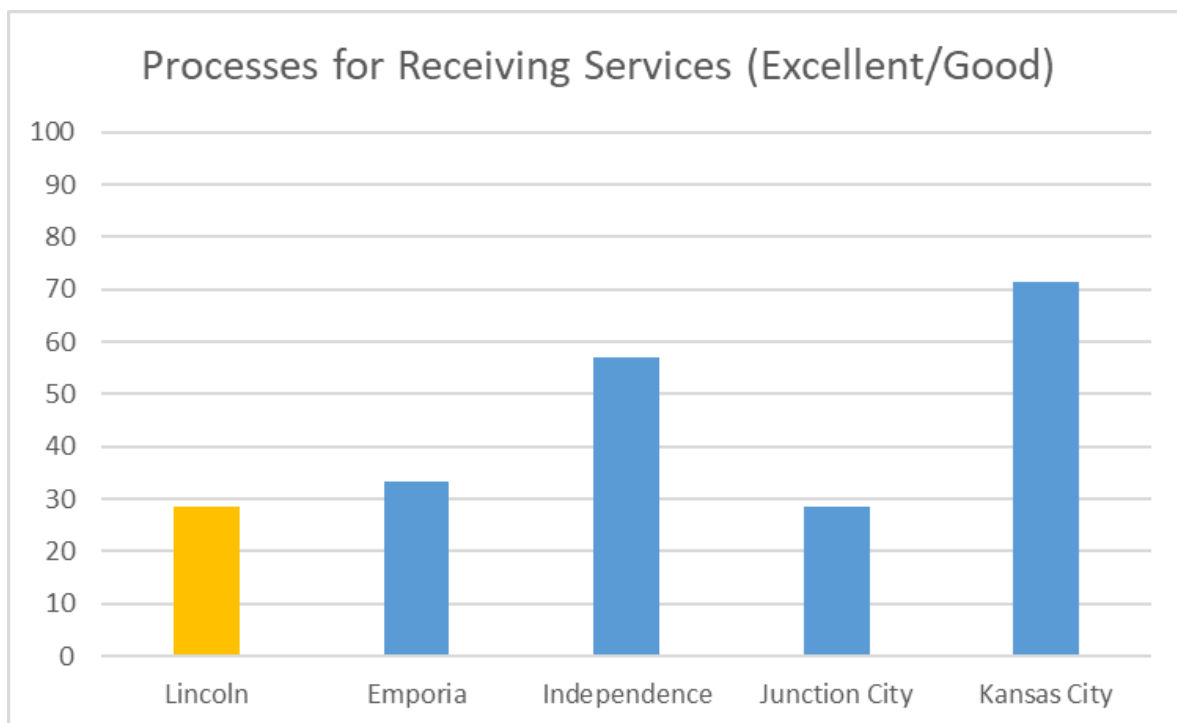
Comparison to Other Cities

In 2017, the PPMC completed a similar secret shopper assessment at Workforce Center sites across Kansas. During this assessment, shoppers were asked to complete a post-visit survey much like the one completed by shoppers who visited the AJC in Lincoln. The responses from shoppers in four cities in Kansas (Emporia, Independence, Junction City, and Kansas City) were compared to those from Lincoln in five areas.

Processes for Receiving Services

Shoppers at each of the sites were asked about the process for receiving services (Figure 1.15). In Lincoln, nearly 30% (29%) responded the processes were “Excellent” or “Good.” This was the same percent indicated by shoppers in Junction City. Shoppers in Emporia (33%) and Independence (57%) reported slightly higher rates. Shoppers in Kansas City were much higher at 71%.

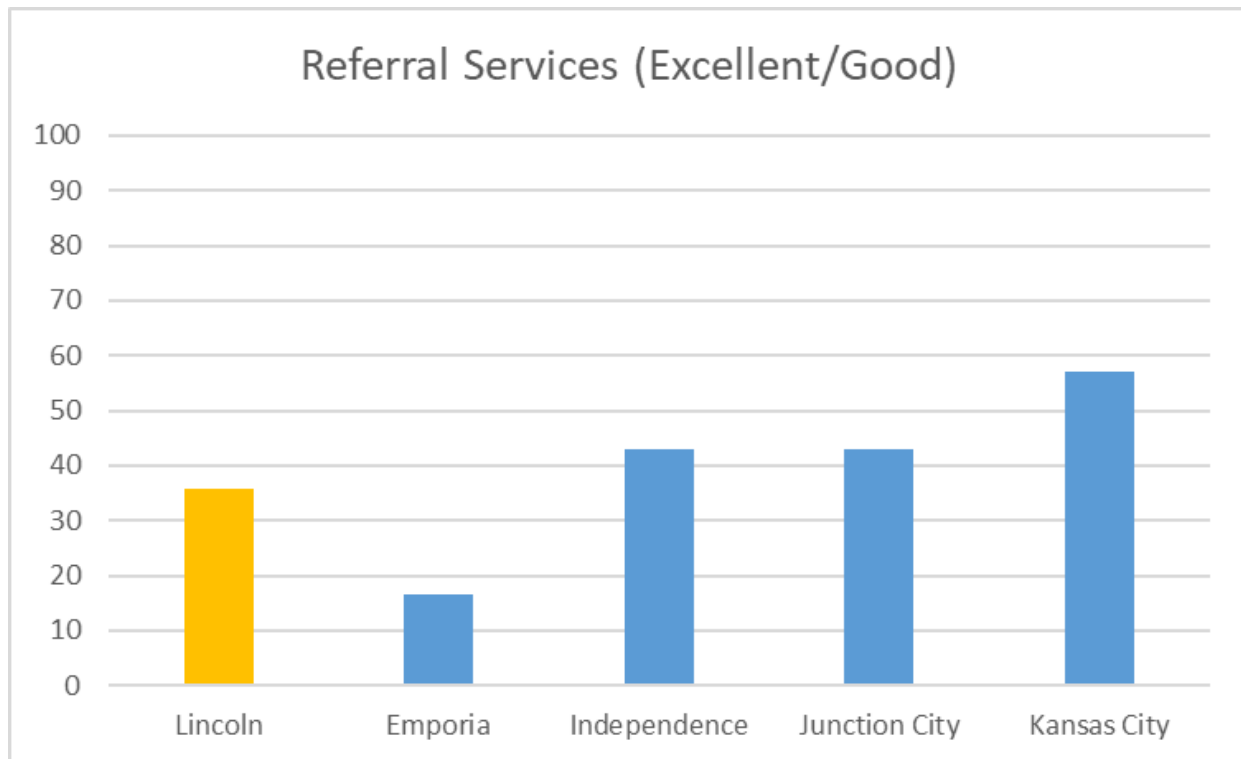
Figure 1.15: Processes for Receiving Services, Percent Excellent/Good Responses



Referral Services

Shoppers at each of the sites were asked about the referral services they received (Figure 1.16). In Lincoln 36% responded that the referral services were “Excellent” or “Good.” This was higher than shoppers in Emporia at 17%. Shoppers in Independence and Junction City reported that the referral services were “Excellent” or “Good” at a slightly higher rate than those in Lincoln (43% each). Shoppers in Kansas City had the highest rate of “Excellent” or “Good” responses at 57%.

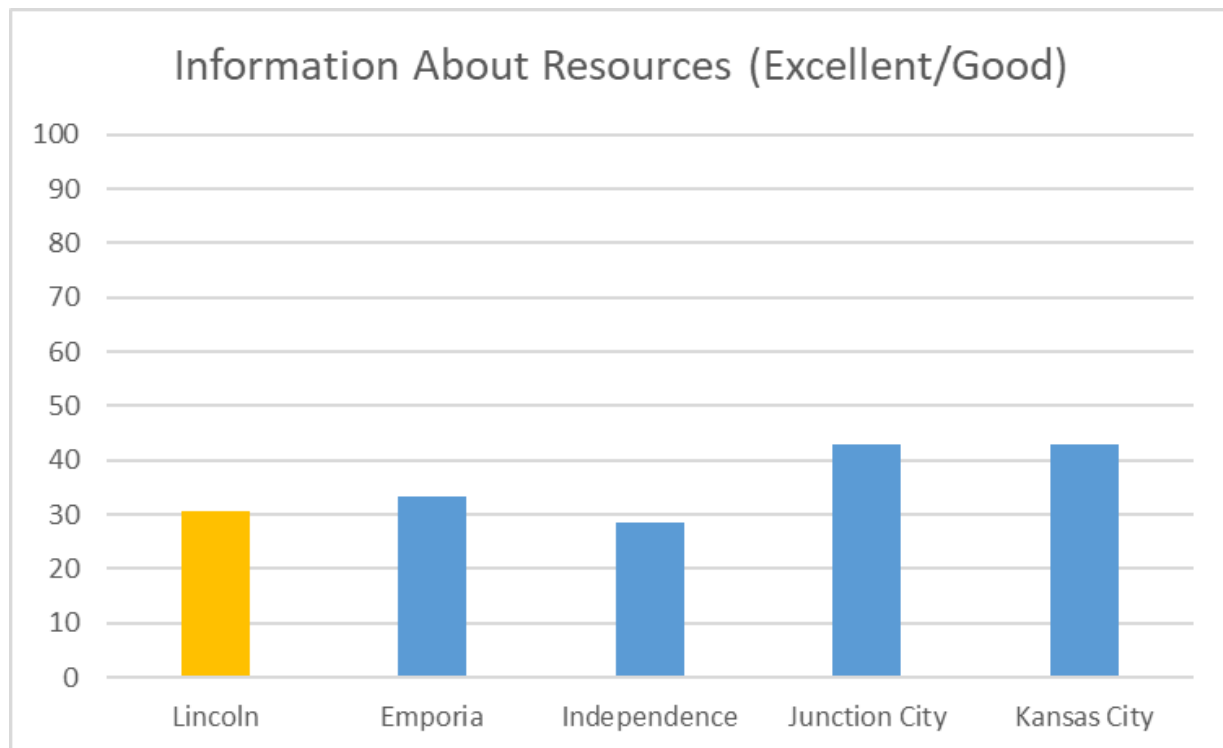
Figure 1.16: Referral Services, Percent Excellent/Good Responses



Information About Resources

Shoppers at each of the sites were asked about the information about resources they received (Figure 1.17). In Lincoln, 31% responded the referral services were “Excellent” or “Good.” This was slightly higher than shoppers in Independence at 29%. Shoppers in Emporia reported the referral services were “Excellent” or “Good” at a similar rate as those in Lincoln (33%). Those in Junction City and Kansas City were higher at 43% each.

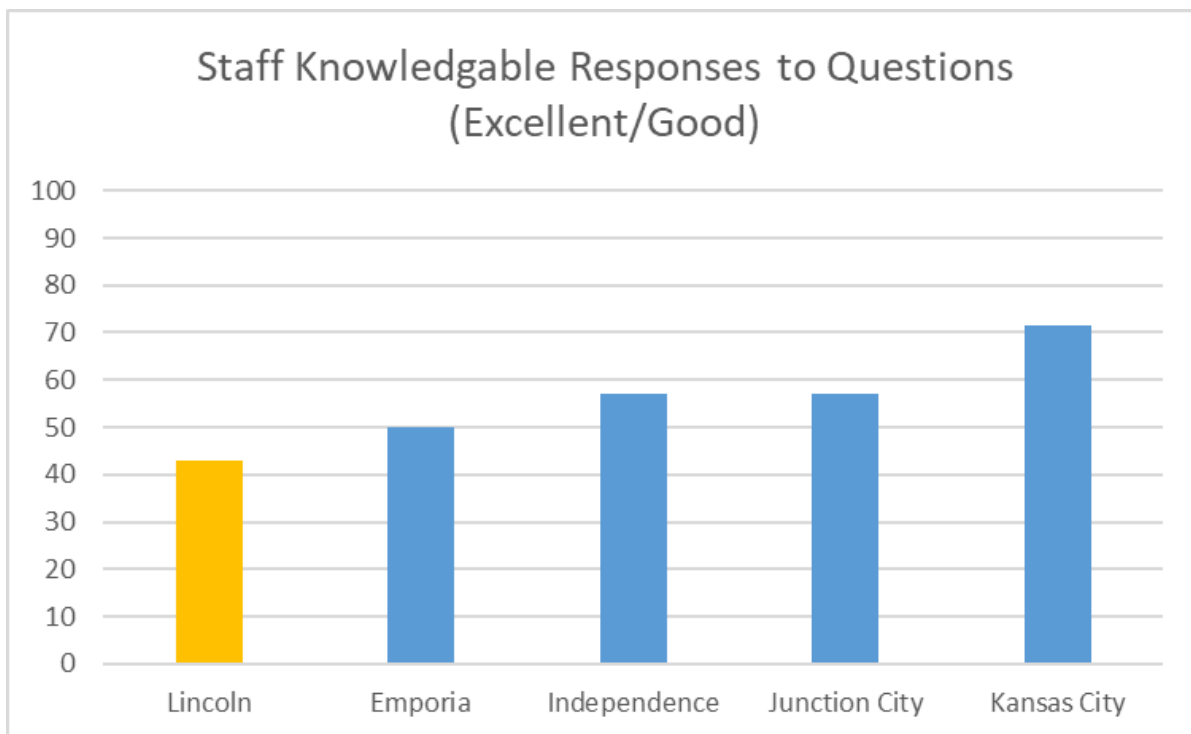
Figure 1.17: Information About Resources, Percent Excellent/Good Responses



Staff Knowledgeable Responses to Questions

Shoppers at each of the sites were asked about their perceptions of the staffs' knowledge when responding to questions (Figure 1.18). In Lincoln, 43% responded that the staffs' knowledgeable response to questions was "Excellent" or "Good." This was just lower than Emporia (50%) and Independence and Junction City (57% each). Kansas City had the highest rate of reported staff knowledge in response to questions at 71%.

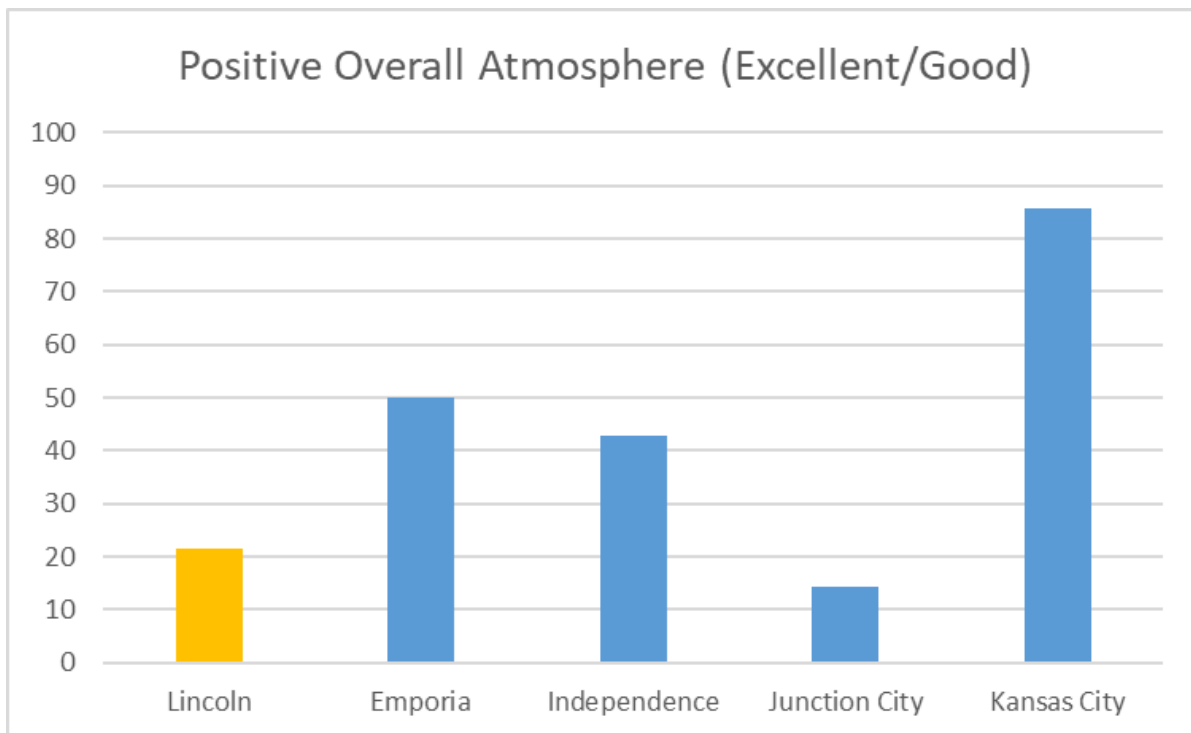
Figure 1.18: Staff Knowledgeable Responses to Questions, Percent Excellent/Good Responses



Positive Overall Atmosphere

As shown in Figure 1.19, shoppers were asked about the positive overall atmosphere of the center. In Lincoln, 21% responded “Excellent” or “Good.” This was higher than the shoppers in Junction City (14%). However, it was lower than shoppers in Independence (43%), Emporia (50%), and Kansas City (86%).

Figure 1.19: Positive Overall Atmosphere, Percent Excellent/Good Responses

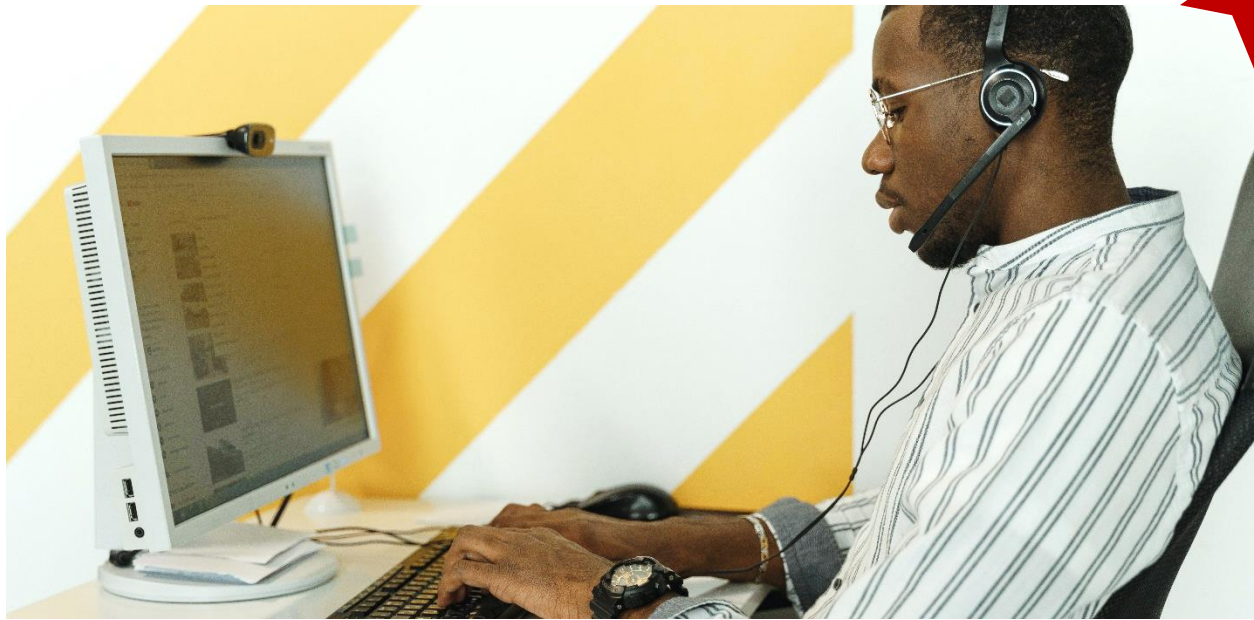


In Kansas, following the 2017 study, recommendations were made and interventions were employed. Following the changes implemented, each of the Kansas sites made demonstrable improvements in each category.

Recommendations

- Provide staff attendance for computer assistance to customers.
- Center should establish a process for following up with customers to provide information regarding resources, training, and services (ex. Interview prep sessions, resume writing services, etc.). Process should include a short timeframe to follow-up (ex- 24 – 48 hours after customer is in Center).
- Current location considerations:
 - Install outside and inside directional/access signage
 - Provide information on website about how to access location
 - Provide information on website about parking options
- Customer Service Training. Topics to include greeting and engaging with customers, working with various types of customers (ex. Disability, ESL, etc.); engaging with customer to obtain information; communication & listening skills; etc.
- DEI or Inclusive training- better assist staff to work with various types of customers and peers.
- Create staff service expectations and then measure success.
- Create a bi-annual or annual contract evaluation process to ensure provider is meeting expectations and needs.
- Staff training regarding AJC services, resources, etc. Staff should know what the center does, and which staff members do which tasks in the center. Additional training should be provided to the front desk staff.
- Create written resources for common services and information related to the AJC. Examples: how to access and use NEworks; FAQ sheet; general resource sheet; information in other languages. These could be handouts provided in person and put on the website.
- Staff should be required to wear nametags or have nameplates on their workspace.
- Staff should provide business cards to customers for them to follow-up for services.

- Front desk staff should have a clear intake process which allows customers to complete information, NEworks information, etc., prior to being referred to other staff members in the Center.
- Review NEworks to identify ways to streamline and make “customer intuitive.” It’s a difficult system to navigate. If unable to update the site, provide clear navigation instructions.
- Create a waiting room space where customers can sit down while waiting for services. Provide seating options in offices/cubicle space for customers to meet with staff.
- Ensure that at the front desk and in other areas of the Center, customers can talk to staff in a confidential manner. Install dividers and separate customers out.
- Train staff on utilizing translation call services to assist customers in the Center. Ensure services provided by center—resume writing, interview prep, NEworks—have a mechanism in place to be translated into various languages.
- Provide a handout for AJC, DOJ, etc. This will assist customers in knowing what services are being provided by which division. This information should also be provided on the website
- Consider installing panic buttons and restroom “unlock” buttons at key locations in the center.



Literature Review

Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) aims to build the U.S. public workforce system and connect Americans, including those with barriers to employment and youth, with high-quality jobs and careers (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). The U.S. Department of Labor partners with the U.S. Department of Education and Health and Human Services to provide resources to States and grantees which assist with WIOA initiatives and programs (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). These programs and initiatives aim to meet the WIOA's three hallmarks of excellence: 1) The needs of businesses and workers drive workforce solutions and local boards are accountable to communities in which they are located, 2) One-Stop Centers (or American Job Centers) provide excellent customer service to job seekers and employers and focus on continuous improvement the workforce system supports, and 3) The workforce system supports strong regional economies and plays an active role in community and workforce development (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.).

American Job Centers

American Job Centers (AJCs) were established under the Workforce Investment Act and reauthorized by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act of 2014 (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). American Job Centers operate as the one-stop centers outlined in the WIOA. Designed to offer job seekers a full range of employment assistance in one location, American Job Centers connect customers with employment training, job listings, career counseling, and other employment services (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Approximately 2,400 AJCs operate nationwide through funding provided by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration (Career One Stop, 2021).

Nebraska Labor Projections

Previous analysis of the Lincoln-area labor market indicates that there is a large pool of individuals who are actively seeking work or express their potential to seek new work opportunities (Lincoln Area Labor Availability Report, 2018). However, a substantial number of job seekers cite a lack of training or education as an obstacle to changing jobs or reentering the workforce. While this pool of potential and active job seekers is overwhelmingly willing to participate in job training, especially if training is accessible and not cost prohibitive, those who cite a need for training are also the most likely to report that they experience barriers to obtaining training.

Economic and labor trends emphasize the need for workforce resources and training opportunities, as evidence suggests the magnitude of the skills gap in the Lincoln area is rising despite a growing local economy (Lincoln Skills Gap, 2018). Lincoln will need to increase the utilization of training programs and prioritize upskilling and reskilling efforts which match the regions in-demand skillsets. The Lincoln area has a network of workforce programs which offer accessible trainings and assistance for individuals looking to reskill or upskill (City of Lincoln, Office of the Mayor, 2020). However, many of Lincoln's local resources for employment and underemployment may be underutilized due to a lack of individual knowledge of available resources (City of Lincoln, Office of the

Mayor, 2020). Lincoln's workforce programs should seek to engage both job seekers and employers in their services and improve information streams in the community.

Research indicates that over the next decade, the annual flow of individuals into the Lincoln-area workforce will exceed annual job openings (Thompson, 2018). This is largely attributed to the number of students who will graduate from regional colleges and universities, implying a surplus of applicants for entry-level white-collar occupations (Thompson, 2018). Alternatively, there is an annual deficit for nearly all blue-collar occupations in the Lincoln area. Deficits are further exacerbated by a significant number of blue-collar workers that face barriers to employment, either because they are considered to have poor work history or are unable to pass a background check (Thompson, 2018). Workforce programs which improve accessibility for formerly incarcerated job seekers or those unable to pass a background check and those with poor work history could partially close this deficit (Belotti, et.al, 2018).

Like most American cities, the COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered and exacerbated many of the Lincoln area's economic challenges (City of Lincoln, Office of the Mayor, 2020). While the full extent of the pandemics' effects is unknown, strategic collaboration between government and various economic and workforce programs will be necessary to meet increasing community needs.

Best Practices

American Job Centers should strive to provide excellent customer service to all job seekers, workers, and employers. All customer groups should feel welcome in one-stop locations and should be assisted by one-stop staff in a responsive, helpful, and courteous manner. Staff members should be sensitive and accommodating to the unique needs of each client, especially to persons with a disability or those with barriers to employment.

For Jessica Billiau and her team at GST MichiganWorks!, putting this into practice resulted in the adoption of five customer service standards (Public Policy and Management Center, 2018).

1. **Attitude:** providing services in a genuinely helpful and courteous manner
2. **Listening:** caring enough to listen intently to customers
3. **Empathy:** understanding the customer's perspective and striving to meet their unique needs
4. **Honesty:** communication with transparency and integrity
5. **Follow-through:** providing complete services, going above and beyond to exceed the customer's expectations.

Attracting and Maintaining Customer Relationships

The one-stop career centers provide valuable services to job seekers in their communities. However, those services may go underutilized if those who are most in need are unaware of local resources. One-stop career centers should assess their communities to determine the best outreach, marketing, and communication methods for their local job seekers (Workforce GPS , n.d.). Depending on regional demographic data, certain populations may require additional outreach efforts, and centers often need unique strategies for attracting and retaining participants from targeted groups (Workforce GPS , n.d.). Strong relationships with local social services agencies, youth recreational facilities, veteran's organizations, or similar public assistance programs can provide agency referrals and streamlined service networks (Workforce GPS , n.d.).

One-stop centers can maintain strong relationships with participants through top-notch service delivery. This includes providing effective programs with customer centered design and a two-way communication stream. Requiring customer satisfaction measures can be an effective way to open up communication and can provide a framework for continuous organizational improvement. Additionally, AJC staff should provide positive examples or models of success to job seekers, as much of a One-stop

Center's success and ability to meet performance outcomes depends on their "ability to communicate and market the benefit of their program's services to the populations they serve (Workforce GPS, n.d.)."

Accessibility for Persons with Barriers to Employment

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act recognizes the importance of aiding job seekers that experience barriers to employment. One-Stop Centers should implement strategies and practices designed to eliminate barriers for job seekers and improve access to employment resources. Due to Lincoln's deficit of blue-collar workers and the current challenges job seekers with poor work or criminal history experience, best practices for inclusion may be of particular interest.

Formerly Incarcerated Job Seekers

American Job Centers have implemented various initiatives and programs to improve accessibility for formerly incarcerated job seekers or those with criminal backgrounds. Programs include supports for those currently in the prison system, expansion of expungement initiatives, and specially developed job opportunities (Detroit Workforce, n.d). The Department of Labor initiative, Linking to Employment Activities Pre- Release (LEAP), demonstrated that collaboration between corrections and workforce agencies can increase participants' work readiness at the time of release, increase employment after release, and reduce recidivism (Belotti, et.al, 2018).

Transportation

Not all job seekers have consistent and reliable access to transportation. This can delay or prevent individuals from utilizing training and education opportunities and workforce resources. AJCs have implemented creative programs and services to eliminate transportation barriers. For example, the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development operates Mobile American Job Centers. These mobile units are equipped to provide comparable services to that of a brick-and-mortar AJC but meet job seekers where they are (American Job Center Tennessee, n.d.).

In other communities, the financial burden of obtaining a driver's license may prohibit some job seekers from receiving employment. Some AJCs have assisted job seekers in obtaining drivers licenses and advocated to decrease the associated costs (Detroit Workforce, n.d).

Resources for Job Seekers with a Disability

Presently, one in four American adults have some type of disability. However, despite making up a significant portion of the population, persons with disabilities make up a small portion of the labor force. The latest Bureau of Labor Statistics data indicates that only 19.3 percent of persons are employed. In contrast, the employment ratio for persons without a disability is 66.3 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics , 2020). The inclusion of persons with a disability in the workforce will be essential to the development of a diverse and inclusive talent pool.

The most recent DOL evaluation of accessibility for persons with disabilities found that almost two-thirds (63%) of AJCs were not “fully accessible,” meaning at least some people with disabilities could not effectively participate in programming (Chamberlain, 2017). The majority of AJCs (92%) met physical accessibility standards, but overall struggled to meet communication and programmatic accessibility standards (Chamberlain, 2017). While limited budgets and personnel resources may be obstacles for centers to provide communications accessibility, providing sign language interpreters or materials in alternate formats can greatly improve access. If possible, AJCs should utilize DOL resources for staff training on serving individuals with communication disabilities (Chamberlain, 2017). Programmatic accessibility was the area where the largest number of AJCs needed improvements. AJC Staff should increase awareness and training on what it means for services to be programmatically accessible and should be sensitive to a wide range of disabilities and associated barriers to employment. In addition to general staff knowledge, AJCs which have a disability expert on staff in addition to Vocational Rehabilitation are more programmatically accessible. The impact of having a disability expert was even more significant on AJCs with staff members with

disabilities, providing an example both for other staff and customers of someone who has found successful employment (Chamberlain, 2017).

AJCs should also strive to involve persons with disabilities in their accessibility and program design efforts. Persons with disabilities have first-hand knowledge of barriers to employment and can be an invaluable asset to the ongoing work of making centers accessible. These individuals can also provide insight into how to improve outreach and engagement of the disability community.

It is important to note that a key observation from the DOL evaluation was the eagerness of AJC staff for more information and guidance about accessibility, making it clear there is a culture of striving for inclusion. Therefore, American Job Centers have an opportunity to provide staff members with the training and resources required to assist persons with a disability and the unique employment challenges they may face.

[Career Advancement Services-Reskilling](#)

Technological advancements have increased the need for workers to be trained and retrained on the usage of new technology. Part of this is providing assessments to job seekers so that they may identify which skills they are lacking, which WIOA lists as a basic career service (Brown & Holcomb, 2018). These assessments should be available online and in person if possible. Assessments offered at resource rooms can introduce the assessment tools with staff available to answer questions. The most common assessments offered at AJCs are career exploration and interest profiler assessments, skill assessments, and personality assessments (Brown & Holcomb, 2018).

With 36.7% of Lincoln job seekers believing that their lack of training is an obstacle to changing jobs or re-entering the workforce and 94.6% of job seekers indicating they were willing to attend employer-sponsored training the following year (Nebraska Departments of Labor & Economic Development, Summer 2018), providing more than assessments to job seekers may increase utilization of the Lincoln AJC beyond their

normal customers and business partners. Computer skills were the most common skills training offered at AJCs, frequently taking the form of typing and Microsoft Office training (Social Policy Research Associates, 2009). For more specialized training, such as GED preparation and language learning, classes from partners were more helpful for the job seeker (Social Policy Research Associates, 2009). Other trainings offered at AJCs included resume preparation, interviewing techniques, appropriate dress habits, punctuality, demeanor, and information on workers' rights (Social Policy Research Associates, 2009). Soft skills training was commonly provided on communication, office politics, problem solving, and time management (Social Policy Research Associates, 2009).

Employers

A review of best practice research shows certain key features that AJCs should have when engaging with employers: a recognition that employers, as well as job seekers, are customers; streamlined, un-bureaucratic, interactions between staff and employers; a continuous search for feedback; and a network of collaborative partners.

Employers as Customers

Since AJCs interact with job seekers on a day-to-day basis, it is easy to forget that employers are also customers. As such, services should be designed with employers in mind and outreach should be done to attract employers (Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, 2014). This outreach includes participation in networking, business, and industry events; job fair attendance; employer check-ins; and employer-targeted media campaigns (Brown & Holcomb, 2018). Additional strategies for employer outreach include engaging with employers in groups so that they can learn from each other and having an advisory committee that will connect and network with employers (Knox & Sypolt, 2011).

Streamlined Interactions

While AJCs may have to deal with cumbersome bureaucratic processes, employers should not. For employers, every interaction they have with the AJC should be made as simple as possible (Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, 2014). This may include reducing the number of AJC staff that an employer must talk with and ensuring that staff are specially trained to address the needs of businesses or a specific industry. Should there be a need for an employer to interact with multiple staff, AJC teams should be collaborating and sharing necessary data to avoid duplication of questions and services (Brown & Holcomb, 2018).

When operating a one-stop center, it is important to think of and operate it like a business. This requires thinking about how the center is being led and managed as well as marketing and business plans (Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, 2014).

Resource rooms serve as a professional and inviting location for customers to access the technological resources they need to find a job. While some customers can utilize these resources without assistance, challenges come during peak times and when customers require assistance from staff. Due to the unique characteristics of many customers who utilize resource rooms, such as weak literacy skills, limited English proficiency, and poor computer literacy, assistance provided by staff is of critical importance. Providing computer literacy training would increase the number of customers who are able to utilize the resource room without staff assistance and allow staff to help other customers (Social Policy Research Associates, 2009).

A comprehensive one-stop center, under law, must be available during regular business hours. However, the local center should strive to be open outside of regular business hours (nights and weekends) in order to accommodate the schedule of working people. If the center cannot do this, they should develop alternative plans for how they will address the needs of working individuals (Employment and Training Administration Advisory System, 2017).

Employer Feedback

Employer feedback is vital to knowing what employers would like and where your AJC is having problems. While contracts and regulations may require obtaining feedback, this should be regularly planned for and not done “as needed.” One recommendation is to provide all staff with a couple questions to ask of every employer at the end of each interaction (Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, 2014). When collecting feedback, a variety of designs should be used such as surveys, focus groups, 1-on-1 meetings, and presentations (Knox & Sypolt, 2011). Data collected should measure both the processes and outcomes and should be analyzed by size of business, industry, and whether the employer currently utilizes AJC services.

Collaboration

Beyond being required by under the WIOA, collaboration with partners is good for employer attraction and retention. Collaboration prevents duplication of services among partners and creates a more streamlined experience for employers (Brown & Holcomb, 2018). Additionally, by sharing employer lists, all partners involved can connect with new, previously unserved, employers (Knox & Sypolt, 2011).

Engaging Partner Organizations

Of the 40 AJCs that Brown & Holcomb studied, 14 centers had no set referral process in place. Among the remaining centers with processes in place, four types were identified. Some maintained a list of points of contacts for their partner organizations and would provide a name and contact information for a customer who needed it. It was left up to the customer to contact the organization. Other centers used a common referral form which all the partners used. These forms would then be taken to the partner organizations, which was also the responsibility of the customer. Six centers would walk the customer to the desk of the partner agency or phone the partner, establishing a connection on behalf of the customer. Lastly, three centers would, in addition to connecting the customer and partner, follow-up with both to check on the status of the referral.

Examples of Innovative Programming

Detroit's Workforce Development System Redesign

The Detroit Mayor's Workforce Development Board has committed to redesigning their workforce system with the goal of increasing residential employment by forty thousand workers (Gwathney, Detroit's Workforce Development System Redesign, 2019). The Board worked with the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce and the University of Michigan Poverty Center to develop strategies to improve the City's current workforce system. After engaging community stakeholder groups, key themes for the redesign were developed. 1) Make it easy – eliminate redundancies and guide customers through steps. 2) Outcomes over incentives – better align incentives, accountability, and processes to outcomes. 3) Focus on your sweet spot – each stakeholder should focus on what they do best and partner to fill gaps. 4) Meet them where they are – bring services to people. 5) Leverage the ecosystem – build on and scale successful collaboration. 6) Invest in technology – increase access to services and automate flow of information (Gwathney, Detroit's Workforce Development System Redesign, 2019).

With these themes in mind, the Workforce Development Board chose to advance a number of programs in three strategic areas: systems change, the expansion of training and career pathways, and barrier elimination. The systems change included the development of the Detroit at Work platform, which provides jobseekers information about available training and jobs and helps connect employers with talent and in-demand skills. Additionally, they chose to expand the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) employment and training due to the U.S. Department of Agriculture match (50%) for the cost of occupational training and education, work experience, and support services that can lead to better employment for SNAP recipients (Gwathney, Detroit's Workforce Development System Redesign, 2019).

Michigan Works! Disability Awareness Resource Team

The Michigan Works Southwest Local Workforce Development Board has created a standing board which focuses on accessibility and resources for job seekers with

disabilities. The Disability Awareness Resource Team (DART) is made up of businesses, service providers, and advocates who are committed to helping persons with disabilities meet their training, career resource, and employment needs. DART's current work plan includes four objectives 1) Develop and implement a comprehensive "disability awareness" curriculum and resource, 2) Develop strategies to foster cross agency collaboration across their region, 3) Develop and implement a formal plan for navigator assistance for job-seeking participants at job/career fairs and expos, and 4) Identify and provide informational updates on emerging issues for workforce development board members and employers in their service area.

The Michigan Works DART board provides AJC staff with training on accessibility, program and service design, awareness of ADA and rights of individuals with disabilities, and various other trainings which focus on improving AJC services for persons with disabilities. The DART board also connects the AJC with local partners and ensures accessibility and inclusiveness at regional workforce events.

[American Job Center Tennessee- Mobile American Job Centers](#)

The Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development have recently implemented the use of mobile American Job Centers. The mobile units provide similar services that job seekers might find in a brick-and-mortar American Job Center without having to travel to the center (American Job Center Tennessee, n.d.). Mobile unit vehicles provide a fully operational computer lab with internet access and Microsoft Suite, as well as copy and fax machines available to job seekers (American Job Center Tennessee, n.d.). Units are staffed with AJC employees who provide workshops for résumé assistance and interviewing skills (American Job Center Tennessee, n.d.). Local employers also benefit from the large number of job seekers that the mobile units are able to attract, and units serve as recruitment centers for new or expanding employers in the southeast Tennessee region (American Job Center Tennessee, n.d.).

Virginia Ready Initiative (VA Ready)

The Virginia Ready Initiative is a nonprofit created to assist dislocated workers from the COVID-19 pandemic. By partnering with leading businesses and community colleges in the state, VA Ready is incentivizing the reskilling of workers. Through their VA Ready Scholar program, workers are quickly trained in a high-demand field in the areas of technology, healthcare, and skilled trades. Through a program with the community colleges known as FastForward, workers looking to reskill are covered for two-thirds of the cost of tuition. After completion of the program, VA Ready scholars receive a \$1,000 achievement award and are given the chance to interview at a variety of companies within the state. Funding for their program is provided by philanthropic donations and by corporate contributions (Gwathney, Virginia Ready Initiative (VA Ready), 2020; What is a VA Ready Scholar, n.d.).

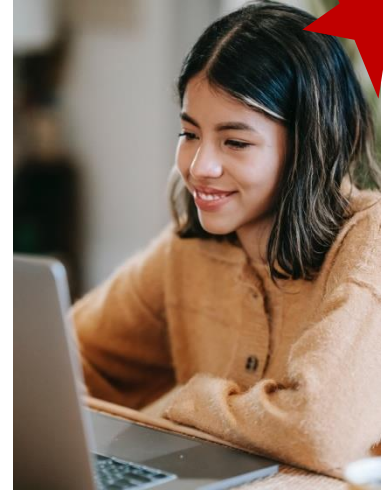
Michigan Summer Employment Program: Summer18

The product of a partnership between Michigan Works! Southeast, the University of Michigan, and Washtenaw County, Summer18 is a 10-week summer program which provides youth (ages 16-24) on-the-job training with local businesses. While working with their employer, youth employees receive mentorship and a \$10 to \$12 hourly wage. Simultaneously, these youth also receive soft-skills training. Now in its fifth year and going by a new name, Summer Works, the program has expanded upon its number of partners and brings in employers to talk about various career paths (Gwathney, MI Summer Employment Program: Summer18, 2018).

Southeast Missouri Agriculture Apprenticeships

Seeing a need for agricultural talent, the Southeast Missouri Workforce Development Board partnered with a local farmer, the Missouri Department of Agriculture, the Southeast Correctional Facility, and others, an apprenticeship program for incarcerated individuals was created. Utilizing available acreages of land at the correctional facility, inmates would grow food and donate it to the local food bank. The individuals involved were trained on organic farming techniques and, after 12-weeks in the program,

obtained a work-release so that they could continue their work on a local farm. Through the creation of the apprenticeship program, the participants earned a certification, work skills, and an employer recommendation prior to release. Apprentices earned \$3/hour while they were incarcerated and, if employed after release, \$15/hour (Gwathney, Agriculture Apprenticeships Budding in Correctional Facility, 2018).



Environment & Space

General Space Considerations

Location decisions should be based on space that best meets the needs of the Center in offering services to their customers. There are several elements that should be evaluated:

- Is the location centrally located to customers being served?
- Is the location visible and easily identified? (Can customers find you?)
- Is the location space adequate to meet current and future needs?
- Does the location meet accessibility needs: parking, bus stop, walking paths, bike accommodations, ADA needs etc.?
- Is the location inviting (good exterior appearance, free from barriers, good signage, etc.)?
- Does the location enhance partnerships and co-location needs? (Can partners also be in the space to enhance the customer services experience?)
- Is the location affordable?
- Does the location allow for modifications to meet service needs?
- Does the location accommodate the hours of operation of the Center? (If opened in the evenings, is there good exterior lighting, close proximity parking, etc.?)

Exterior Space

How do customers and staff access your Center? Do they walk, bike, drive, or utilize public transportation to engage with the Center? For example, if customers rely on public transportation to get to the Center, is the Center located on a main bus line with a bus stop near-by? If customers arrive by personal vehicle, is there parking available close-by and is the parking readily available or being shared? If biking to the Center, are there bike racks available so that they can enter the Center for services? Exterior signage is critical to ensuring that customers are clear about where to enter and where to access the Center services within the building. Sign text should be readable from the street to clearly identify where the Center is located. ADA compliance to access the building, enter the building, and engage through the building should be confirmed. Exterior appearance will need to be free from impediments that limit access or prevents customers from identifying where services are located such as: landscape elements (overgrown trees, grasses that cover signage or entrances); sidewalks that are in disrepair that may cause trip hazards, etc.; doors that are not easily accessible (could include low-weight doors, ADA button access).

Interior Space

The focus of selecting and designing space is to experience it from a customer perspective. One place to begin is to walk through the current Center location space and identify, from a customer perspective, the features that enhance and detract from a positive experience. In preparation for selecting a new space, take what you learn and develop plans that will remove barriers and enhance services. This information will help assist in identifying the type and size of space needed moving forward. The same method to evaluate the interior space can also be used to evaluate the exterior and location of a new center. Overall, both the exterior and interior spaces should appear to be clean and free from obstacles.

Design Elements

- Color scheme selection should consider maintenance requirements related to wear and tear and use. For example, darker paint colors will show knicks and scrapes more than lighter color paint. The same is true for carpet colors.
- Carpet decisions should consider wear patterns and policies that allow food and drink in the center. Evaluate the use of carpet tiles/squares, especially in high traffic areas and/or lobbies. Carpet squares provide ease of replacement in areas that experience wear, spills, etc., but don't require large space replacement.
- Lighting fixtures should have features that create maximum lighting, especially if ceilings are high. If florescent light fixtures are selected, consider lenses that are more transparent so that the space is well lit.
- Windows, with blinds or tinting, can enhance common public areas and staff offices. They allow light in and make the space feel larger.
- Interior signage should be clear, concise, and label space appropriately. If customers are moving throughout the building, then wayfinding signage would be helpful. Signs should follow ADA considerations related to contrast (example- darker background with lighter text- easy to read). Signage may also be helpful for general instructions to customers or to highlight various elements of the space. For example, a hanging sign might call attention to resources on shelves or a brochure/resource rack.
- Furniture in the Center should be durable and easy to clean. Although fabric seating would be considered comfortable, it is difficult to maintain over long periods of time. Select furniture that can be easily cleaned by wiping it down with soap and water or cleaning cloths. Selecting wood accent chairs or wooden tables may need to be evaluated. Wood will show wear and is more difficult to maintain.

- To add interest and personality to the space consider selecting appropriate pictures for the walls that highlight or correspond to what takes place in the Center. This could be historic “work” pictures or other artwork that is general in nature. Use specific Center posters and information sparingly and limit it to only key areas.
- Internet capacity related to staff and customer computer and cellphone use should be designed to accommodate needs at full capacity.

In addition to temperature, air quality, etc., one of the human factors to consider in the Center is using music in the workspace. Playing music in the customer areas will depend on if the space needs to be quiet for customers to complete work and engage with staff. Although music can enhance lobby areas, it may be distracting in areas where direct assistance is being provided. Music should be considered carefully before implementation. Before a decision is made consider these questions: Will the music be instrumental only? Will music include vocals? What genre or style of music will be played? Will it be a “live” radio station? Will the music be from a playlist? Each of these questions have positive and negative impacts. Music volume will also need to be considered. Overall, if music is playing, will it detract or enhance the work of the Center?

Identifying Space Needs

Space needs should be determined by outlining staff and customer space requirements. These are the decisions related to: number offices and cubicles, types and sizes of shared spaces, customer spaces, etc.

Staff Space

Staff space needs should be determined by evaluating staff members' job functions and how they interact with customers. Job functions include:

- type of work they do
- frequency of working directly with customers and how many customers at a time
- storage needs
- technology requirements (double monitors)
- confidentiality requirements (in-person and phone)
- privacy needs
- need to minimize office noise

Answers to these questions will identify who needs an office or who is able to work in a cubicle as well as how big the offices and cubicles must be. Staff will not necessarily need an office because they need a private setting to work with customers. If staff are working in cubicles and they needed to meet privately with customers, they could utilize smaller rooms. These rooms could be utilized by multiple people when needed.

When evaluating space needs consider space for:

- storage
- copy/mail center
- break room
- conference room(s)
- training space
- lobby/entry needs
- resource space
- technology equipment
- restrooms (staff and/or customer spaces)
- drinking fountains
- public vending spaces (if applicable)

Sizes for all these spaces will be dependent on the number of people utilizing these areas and the type of furniture selected. For example, ergonomic workstations that are flexible to addressing employee needs vs. stand-alone furniture that could take up more “floor” space but not necessarily provide more staff workspace should be considered for both offices and cubicles.

Customer Space

Direct customer service areas should be in designated areas, preferably in close proximity to each other. It is optimal to limit the need for customers to move throughout the entire office space. Customer spaces should be identified near the main entrance/lobby areas. This limits the need to walk customers throughout the building or allow them to walk throughout the office space on their own. It may also be beneficial to have a generic office or workspace so that staff can meet with customers outside of their personal office or cubicle. If customer space cannot be “centrally” located, then identify minimal, direct pathways throughout the building and utilize wayfinding signage.

Front desk space is helpful if you want customers directed to a central location to begin their services. Without a front desk, the Center would need to identify a “check-in” space where customers would be greeted. Front desks have traditionally served as an entry and welcoming point where customers can obtain general information, check-in for services, and ask questions. In addition, the front desk can initiate some services before customers move to another area of the building. If information is provided at various areas, the customer may be confused about where to start and how to flow through the building. If a front desk is utilized, it would be helpful to permanently assign staff to work in that space. Ensure that the front desk is equipped for staff to be able to complete tasks and assignments while working with customers or when customers do not need direct assistance.

In lieu of a front desk, customers could be directed to a “central” space, like a resource center, to obtain services. Staff would then need to be assigned to this space, so that it

can function in the same way that a front desk would. The Center will need to determine how best to serve customers when they initially enter the Center and how to fully engage them in services.

To create a customer-focused workspace, all elements related to design, arrangement, furniture, etc., should be viewed from the customer point of view. What adds value to the customer experience and what detracts from it? Consideration should also be given to long-term maintenance of the elements so that the space doesn't prematurely show wear or require great measures to remain "fresh". All considerations made for customers will also apply to staff working in the center.

Literature Review of Environmental Factors

Physical location and space can play a significant role in the outcomes and success of American Job Centers. Programs are most effective when they are physically accessible to job seekers, employers, and community partners. As mentioned above, most AJCs meet physical accessibility requirements for persons with disabilities. Due to the frequent location of AJCs in government buildings, large structural changes are not often possible. Those that wish to further improve physical accessibility can often make small changes like ensuring interior aisles are kept clear of furniture and ensuring a doorbell for customers if the main entrance has no power door (Chamberlain, 2017).

American Job Centers can look to human factors research to ensure that their offices are comfortable and productive for their customers and staff. Indoor Environmental Quality (IEQ) has been used by researchers for decades to describe an individual's experience in their workspace and associated productivity. The primary physical elements which effect the IEQ in office environments are: 1) Indoor Air Quality, 2) Thermal Comfort, 3) Lighting Quality, and 4) Acoustical Quality, 5) Office Layout, and 6) Exterior Views (Greenery).

While all factors play an important role in work efficiency and outputs, research indicates that indoor air quality and thermal comfort have the largest impact (Mahbob, 2011). Indoor air quality is described as the degree of quality of air in an indoor environment. Research indicates a strong link between poor human health and productivity and poor indoor air quality. Indoor air quality can be improved by increasing the ventilation of the environment or by reducing and removing contaminants through filtration. Thermal comfort is described as “*state of mind which expresses satisfaction with the thermal environment (Yousef Al Horr, 2017).*” Current research indicates temperature changes within the 64°F–86 °F range can influence performance in office tasks like reading, typing, and learning (Yousef Al Horr, 2017). The temperature 69°F–77 °F is suggested to be a stable temperature range for office productivity (Yousef Al Horr, 2017). Productivity is shown to decrease by 2% per 1 °F increase in temperature in the range of 77 °F–86 °F (Yousef Al Horr, 2017).

For a customer-focused organization, there are three distinct interior designs to consider: modern, romantic, and pragmatic (Pecoraro & Uusitalo, 2014). Which design to follow should reflect the values of the organization and the image they are looking to convey. A modern design projects an image of expertise with staff who are looking to solve the consumer’s problems. A modern design can also come off as clinical and distant, drawing comparisons to a hospital. A romantic design conveys a sense of friendly cooperation with staff coming off as peers to the customer. This design was also described as one provoking random encounters and casual conversations. In contrast to the modern and romantic designs, the pragmatic design is a neutral design. Interactions with employees are focused on satisfying the needs of the customer and the place is laid out in an efficient manner. Customers are encouraged to help themselves by this design, like a customer in retail chain store.

While the color scheme utilized does not appear to influence productivity of workers, the color scheme does appear to impact mood (Kwallek, Woodson, & Lewis, 1998). Red office color schemes generated more discomfort among workers while light blue-green

color schemes were more calming. White color schemes were found to be discomforting to some, possibly because of a lack of contrast with the rest of the office.

Part of ensuring office productivity is through ensuring acoustic comfort for those inside of the office. The most common noise problems inside an office building are noise from outside the building, noise from adjacent spaces, and lack of sound control (Paradis, 2016). To avoid the outside noise, site selection is important, and the building should be located away from noisy parts of town. If this is not possible, locate quiet areas within the building away from the outside sources of noise. For noises coming from inside the building, sound masking can be utilized. Sound masking incorporates unobtrusive background noise, like the sound of softly blowing air, to mask distracting noises and speech.

At most AJCs, a coordinated service delivery path is utilized (Brown & Holcomb, 2018). This delivery path begins with a greeter who welcomes the customer and, optionally, signs them up for AJC services and orientation. These orientations may be online or in-person and led by specific program staff or by rotating program staff from different service areas. Once orientation is completed, the customer would complete a common intake form containing basic information, which would be provided to all partner programs. After completion of the intake form, the greeter would direct the customer to the appropriate services.

In addition to physical environment, the physical location of American Job Centers may have some effect on customer outcomes. To promote access, AJCs may be co-located on college campuses, in government buildings, or with organizations that have similar missional work (Van Noy, 2015). While relationships between community colleges and the workforce system have a role in student success, a study of AJCs on community college campuses in North Carolina found no relationship between AJC co-location and student outcomes (Van Noy, 2015). While no relationship was found in North Carolina, additional analyses would be required to fully assess the effect of co-location on community college campuses.

Other physical location factors to consider include proximity to public transportation and how accessible the building is to people who walk or bike (The Whole Building Design Guide Sustainable Committee, 2018). Considering the clientele that AJCs attract, easy access to low-cost transportation is even more important. Ensuring the parking lots and sidewalks are exposed to sunlight will help to melt snow and ice in the wintertime. Trees planted in the areas that receive the most sunshine will shade the building and help to reduce energy costs associated with cooling the building.



Employee Feedback

Background

In June 2021, the PPMC sought feedback from current AJC employees. In order to gather this feedback, the AJC hosted an employee focus group and launched an electronic survey. Both were part of the work plan established with the AJC. The purpose of the focus group and survey were to engage with employees to understand what is working well at the AJC and in what areas improvements are needed.

Methodology – Focus Group

The AJC staff identified employees and sent out the Zoom link invitation to participate in the focus group session. The facilitated focus group session was designed to identify AJC's effectiveness in service delivery and provide recommendations for future services beneficial to both employees and job seekers. One focus group was conducted, and participants were asked seven questions designed to capture the experience and knowledge of the attendees. The session was approximately 60 minutes.

Summary of Responses

The employees overall reported they do a good job in meeting the needs of job seekers. One participant reported that the staff at the AJC provides, “rock solid customer service to people across all backgrounds.” They indicated assisting people with navigating NEworks and other online resources were areas where they did particularly well. Some of the most helpful services they provide include job fair events, on-site interviewing sessions, job postings, and providing a “go-to” representative to assist with filing for unemployment.

Of the challenges the AJC has in meeting the needs of job seekers, the employees indicated that the location was the biggest barrier. They indicated that the location is hard to find and that being split within the building creates barriers in working cohesively. Two issues of particular concern were parking and bathrooms. They indicated that there is a fee to park in the garage for longer than one hour. This can create a barrier for an unemployed or underemployed individual in being able to spend the time at the center they need. In addition, the bathrooms create issues. The bathrooms are locked, and the process for staff to assist job seekers with accessing the bathroom creates problems.

Other services that the employees thought might be helpful include hosting more workshops, providing specialized assistance for individuals on probation or parole, and offering in-person translation services (vs. the phone service currently in use).

The location was also a key issue that employees reported in regard to why some businesses do not use AJC services. They indicated that the downtown location was too far removed from many of the businesses who could benefit from using AJC services. They also indicated that there is a lack of understanding regarding AJC services and how they might be helpful to businesses.

In addition, the employees reported feeling disconnected from the Workforce Board. They indicated that having some sort of training available to help staff understand the connection between the board and the AJC would be helpful. They also indicated that there seemed to be a lack of urgency on behalf of the Board when decisions needed to be made. Examples they gave included the issues with the bathrooms, attempts to help job seekers outside of the regular menu of options, and building security.

Methodology – Survey

The AJC staff identified employees and sent out a link to participate in the electronic survey. The survey was designed to identify the employee's perceptions of the AJC's effectiveness in service delivery and provide recommendations for future services beneficial to both employees and job seekers. The areas of focus included general customer service, individual customer service, employee training, teamwork, and environment/procedures.

General Customer Service

Overall, as shown in Figure 4.1, employees believe that the AJC provides good customer service. In all areas, at least 78% of employees responded that they either "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with the statement given. In particular, 100% of employees "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that the AJC communicates effectively with the public. The statements with the highest rates of "Strongly Disagree" or "Disagree" (21%) were, "My Workforce Center has an efficient intake process for customers" and "The AJC shares information with other Workforce Centers in order to improve services or assist customers."

Figure 4.1: General Customer Service

Question	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
Our Workforce Center communicates effectively with the public.	-	0	-	0	64.29%	9	35.71%	5
The Workforce Center makes an effort to attract customers with diverse backgrounds.	-	0	14.29%	2	35.71%	5	50.00	7
Staff at my Workforce Center cooperate to provide professional customer service for everyone.	-	0	7.14%	1	42.86%	6	50.00	7
Customers at the Workforce Center are usually served promptly.	-	0	14.29%	2	42.86%	6	42.86%	6
My Workforce Center has an efficient intake process for customers.	-	0	21.43%	3	35.71%	5	42.86%	6
Our customers have access to timely and accurate information about job postings.	-	0	7.14%	1	35.71%	5	57.14%	8
It is worthwhile for customers to come to our Center because we usually provide additional services, beyond what they can get from NEworks.com.	-	0	14.29%	2	50.00%	7	35.71%	5
The AJC shares information with other Workforce Centers in order to improve services or assist customers.	7.14%	1	14.29%	2	64.29%	6	14.29%	2
Management at the AJC is focused on improving customer service.	7.14%	1	-	0	42.86%	6	50.00	7
Customer service performance is very important when evaluating AJC employees' job performance.	7.14%	1	7.14%	1	28.57%	4	57.14%	8

Individual Customer Service

As shown in Figure 4.2, employees were asked about the customer service they individually provide. Again, the employees reported providing good customer service. In all areas, over 91% of employees responded that they either “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” with the statement given.

Figure 4.2: Individual Customer Service

Question	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
I strive to use community partnerships to better serve customers.	-	0	7.14%	1	57.14%	8	35.71%	5
I think most customers leave the workforce center satisfied with the service they receive.	-	0	7.14%	1	64.29%	9	28.57%	4
I believe the work I do plays an important role in providing quality customer service.	-	0	8.33%	1	41.67%	5	50.00%	6
I am confident that I understand the needs and expectations of customers.	-	0	8.33%	1	33.33%	4	58.33%	7
I view every customer as a unique individual with a need or problem that requires my assistance.	-	0	-	0	33.33%	4	66.67%	8
I try to understand my customer's point-of-view.	-	0	-	0	16.67%	2	83.33%	10
I am confident I can recognize when a customer is upset.	-	0	-	0	16.67%	2	83.33%	10
I know how to problem-solve when serving an upset customer.	-	0	-	0	33.33%	4	66.67%	8
I feel confident that I can handle the stress of difficult interactions with customers.	-	0	-	0	16.67%	2	83.33%	10
I am confident that my body language is appropriate when I interact with customers.	-	0	-	0	25.00%	3	75.00%	9
When a customer complains, I usually know what to do to fix the situation.	-	0	8.33%	1	50.00%	6	41.67%	5
I know where to refer customers in the event our Center cannot help.	-	0	-	0	5.00%	6	50.00%	6
I am proud of the service I provide to our customers.	8.33%	1	-	0	41.67%	5	50.00%	6
I am proud to tell people that I work for this organization.	8.33%	1	-	0	33.33%	4	58.33%	7
I am committed to providing customers with excellent service.	-	0	-	0	27.27%	3	72.73%	8

In addition, employees were asked about their confidence in successfully meeting the needs of job seekers with a variety of special circumstances or backgrounds (Figure 4.3). Overall, the employees indicated that they were, with over 78% responding “Somewhat Confident” or “Very Confident” to each circumstance given. The groups with the highest rate of “Not Confident” responses were Persons with disabilities (21%), Senior citizens and Non-English speakers (or ESL) (both 14%), and Veterans and Persons with complaints (both 7%).

Figure 4.3: Meeting the Needs of Individuals with Special Circumstances

Question	Not confident		Somewhat Confident		Very Confident	
Persons with disabilities	21.43%	3	35.71%	5	42.86%	6
Senior citizens	14.29%	2	35.71%	5	50.00%	7
Veterans	7.14%	1	28.57%	4	64.29%	9
Persons from other cultures	-	0	35.71%	5	64.29%	9
Non-English speakers (or ESL)	14.29%	2	42.86%	6	42.86%	6
Persons with complaints	7.14%	1	35.71%	5	57.14%	8
Persons who have low literacy skills	-	0	42.86%	6	57.14%	8
Persons with incarceration history	-	0	28.57%	4	71.43%	10

Employee Training

Employees were also asked to respond to statements regarding training they received regarding customer intakes and the array of services and programs available at the AJC (Figure 4.4). Most employees indicated that they were cross-trained and could complete customer intakes when needed (64%). A quarter (25%) of responding employees indicated that they either “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree” that they are adequately trained on the services, products, and programs that the AJC can provide.

Figure 4.4: Employee Training

Question	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
Staff are cross-trained to assist with customer intake when needed.	-	0	35.71%	5	42.86%	6	21.43%	3
I am adequately trained on the services, products and programs the AJC can provide.	8.33%	1	16.67%	2	41.67%	5	33.33%	4

Teamwork

Figure 4.5 shows how employees responded to questions regarding teamwork at the AJC. The majority of employees, over 80%, responded that they “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” with statements presented.

Figure 4.5: Teamwork

Question	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
My co-workers have a positive attitude.	-	0	-	0	85.71%	12	14.29%	2
Among my co-workers, my opinions and ideas count.	-	0	8.33%	1	66.67%	8	25.00%	3
I know how my work impacts others in the Workforce Center.	-	0	16.67%	2	58.33%	7	25.00%	3
The people I work with respect the work others do.	8.33%	1	8.33%	1	50.00%	6	33.33%	4

Environment/Procedures

Employees were also asked about the physical workplace environment, the location, and internal procedures (Figure 4.6). These statements garnered the highest number of “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” responses from the employees. While most “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that their physical workplace meets their needs (57%), 43% did not. In addition, 21% do not believe the physical workplace meets the needs of customers. Almost all the employee respondents (93%) indicated that customers report the AJC is not easy to locate. Over a fifth (21%) “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” that the Workforce Center has effective communication processes. Over a third (36%)

“Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” that there are sufficient procedures in place to ensure the safety of both customers and staff.

Figure 4.6: Environment/Procedures

Question	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
Given the type of work I do, my physical workplace (e.g. technology, furniture, etc.) meets my needs.	7.14%	1	35.71%	5	28.57%	4	28.57%	4
The physical workplace (e.g. computers, desk space, signage etc.) meets most of our customers' needs.	7.14%	1	14.29%	2	64.29%	9	14.29%	2
Customers report that the AJC is easy to locate.	69.29%	9	28.57%	4	-	0	7.14%	1
The Workforce Center has effective communication processes.	-	0	21.43%	3	42.86%	6	35.71%	5
There are sufficient procedures to ensure the safety of both customers and staff.	14.29%	2	21.43%	3	35.71%	5	28.57%	4

Recommendations

- Provide customer service training to employees to specifically include:
 - Working with non-English speakers and accessing translation services
 - Working with people with disabilities
 - Working with veterans
 - Handling customer complaints
- Provide employee training regarding the menu of services available at AJC and through partner agencies.
- Provide employees with a clear understanding of the management structure of the AJC and the Workforce Board, including how the different parts work together to meet the needs of job seekers.
- Improve internal communication processes, both within the AJC and between the AJC and the Board.
- Consider immediate changes to the current physical location in order to improve access. Examples include:
 - Improve signage both inside and outside the building
 - Provide comped parking or give clear directions for lower cost parking options in the area
 - Address staff and customer safety concerns
 - Address bathroom access issues
- Keep feedback regarding location barriers in mind when designing the new space for the AJC.



Partner Interviews

Background

In January and February 2021, the Public and Policy and Management Center (PPMC) separately interviewed the partners of the American Job Center (AJC). The purpose of the interviews was to listen to the partners, understand the effectiveness of the partnership, and identify opportunities for strengthening the AJC's Workforce Center's services.

Methodology

Interviews were completed with 11 partners, including: 1) TANF Program/Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services; 2) Adult Education/Nebraska Department of Education; 3) Nebraska Department of Labor; 4) Community Action; 5) National Able Network; 6) Proteus; 7) Nebraska VR; 8) Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired; 9) Southeast Community College; 10) Lincoln Housing Authority; 11) Ponca Tribe of Nebraska.

Summary

Partners appreciate the opportunities to collaborate with the AJC and other partners, enabling each to collectively offer clients more services. Partner resources and forums are appreciated, particularly the opportunity to have partners present programs at one another's events.

The AJC staff is considered very accommodating and welcoming. Partners report the AJC has a good understanding of what partners do and are engaged with partners. The AJC is considered a good referral resource. Partners appreciate that the AJC works hard to stay open and available. All partners view the resource room as a valuable resource for clients.

In addition, partners are encouraged by the AJC's efforts towards improvements and their willingness to include partners in discussions. The quarterly meetings are helpful in providing updates from other partners, as well as an opportunity to get to know each other.

Communication and the soliciting of feedback from the AJC is good. It was noted, however, that communication does not always reach the appropriate staff in the partner agencies. In addition, turnover of AJC staff is an obstacle to understanding staff roles and responsibilities and building continuity in working relationships between AJC and partners' staff. It was suggested that partners could schedule quarterly meetings of their leadership teams to facilitate communication and collaboration.

Partners note that facility challenges include difficulty in finding the location of the AJC, lack of space, and lack of parking. In addition, the AJC's visibility and customer awareness is hindered by the use of several names.

The funding agreement is not transparent or well-understood by partners. Some partners think the agreement is fair, but others think tying fees to the number of

participants served is a disincentive, discouraging partner's from growing their referrals to the AJC.

There is a desire among partners to increase co-referrals so that all partners benefit. Some smaller partners feel overlooked and want the AJC to reciprocate with more referrals. Partners also identified the need for an integrated data system to track referrals, which would include seamless co-enrollment, seamless services, and collaboration with shared case management. Partners would like to know if their referred clients follow through and make appointments with the AJC. They are also interested in finding out if referred clients are satisfied with the services they receive.

Partners measure success differently. They are interested in what data is needed by the AJC and how data they currently provide is used in decision-making. In addition, there is a desire to better understand each partner's performance goals and identify opportunities to collaborate for shared success.

Partners noted WIOA is linked to the state plan and actions at the local level. More clarity is needed about whose job it is to bring together all players together for success. Partners expressed a desire for leadership and development of a shared sense of direction for the future.

Recommendations

- Explore opportunities to re-locate the facility providing ease of location, better parking and more space for workshops and job seeker counseling.
- Increase transparency of funding methodology; address concerns surrounding formula's disincentives for agencies' growth.
- Create a formal referral process with seamless co-enrollment, seamless services. and collaboration with shared case management.
- Work with partners to identify appropriate data needed for measuring success and identify how data is used.
- Encourage partners to push information from AJC down to the staff in their organizations.
- Improve NEworks for persons with disabilities.
- Offer staff training in customer service, particularly for assistance to persons with disabilities, migrant workers, and seasonal workers.
- Work with partners to identify virtual services that can be available when in-person providers are not on-site.
- Engage in a strategic planning process to identify goals and strategies for success.



Business Partner Focus Groups

Background

In April and May 2021, the PPMC hosted business partner focus groups as part of the work plan established with the American Job Center, Lincoln, Nebraska. The purpose of the focus group was to engage with business partners on their knowledge, utilization, and engagement with the AJC.

Methodology

The AJC staff identified business partners and sent out a Zoom link invitation to participate in the focus group sessions. The facilitated focus group sessions were designed to identify AJC's effectiveness in service delivery and provide recommendations for future services beneficial to the business partners. Three focus groups were conducted, and participants were asked seven questions designed to capture the experience and knowledge of the attendees. Each session was approximately 30 – 45 minutes.

Summary of Responses

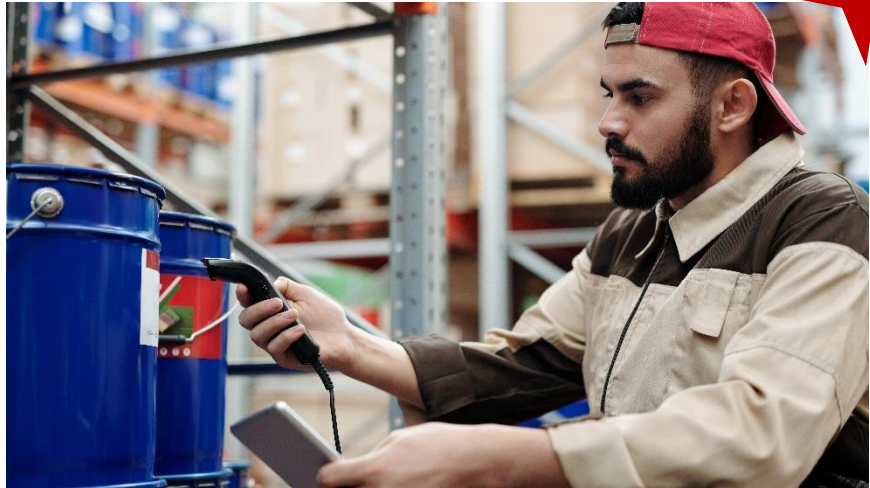
The business partners that had utilized the AJC services, stated that the Center staff they worked with were pleasant, polite, and good to work with. The most helpful services provided by the Center included job fair events, on-site interviewing sessions, job postings, and providing a “go-to” representative to work with the businesses on services most beneficial to them. Generally, some of the participants recognized that the Center does provide valuable assistance to job seekers needing additional services, such as access to database of available jobs and filling out applications. It was acknowledged that the AJC provides a candidate pool for entry level positions.

Most of the businesses were unaware of the AJC or the services they provided. Some had previously engaged; however, it had been several years. Most had not been contacted by the AJC staff and they were unaware of current services being provided by the AJC or how to engage with them. Most of those who were aware of the AJC and the services provided stated that they did not use the AJC website to recruit new employees. Reasons they gave included: lack of time to go through the site to identify viable candidates, issues with the site not being user friendly, and a time-consuming process to post a position on the site. Most acknowledged that they used other recruiting sites such as LinkedIn, Nebraska Job Site, Glassdoor, and other resources for this purpose. There was some belief that the AJC is not a viable resource except to fill low level, non-technical positions.

Analysis and Recommendations

- Implement consistent communication outreach with businesses:
 - Create a business engagement list with contact information and assign AJC business representatives to engage.
 - Establish an in-person meeting schedule with businesses to understand their needs and partner around services.
- Address the lack of business awareness about available services:
 - Create simple marketing materials that provide businesses with AJC service information.
 - Engage consistently with businesses about services and encourage them to use them.
- Partner with groups, such as the Chamber, to interact with businesses.
- Teach business contacts how to use website services.
- Change perception of AJC by providing information about services offered and candidates available.
- Utilize testimonial information to highlight value of AJC.
- Identify ways AJC provides assistance and what makes the Center unique.
- Advertise AJC services such as job fairs, etc., more broadly than current methods.
- Identify funding resources for marketing materials and methods that do not conflict with federal funding parameters.
- Evaluate website and identify areas of improvement:
 - Improve and streamline accessibility for businesses to access and post positions.
 - Improve the ability of businesses to obtain candidate information when looking to fill open positions.
- Provide “analytic” information to businesses- example: number of persons that look at or apply for business job postings.
- Conduct a business needs assessment to identify services beneficial to businesses.

- Utilize needs assessment to partner with businesses in both traditional and non-traditional ways:
 - Implement additional on-site interview opportunities.
 - Include more businesses in on-site and drive-through job fairs.
 - Utilize broad advertising methods for job flyers and postings.
- Implement a system that can “blast out” opportunities for jobs to candidates easily and efficiently (like Handshake).
- Utilize computers in resource room as a testing site for businesses.
- Partner with businesses to assist in providing transportation resources for job seekers hired from the AJC.
- Implement in-person training sessions to assist job seekers with other skills needed to be successful in a job beyond resume writing and interview skills



Job Seeker Focus Groups

Background

In April, May, June, and July of 2021, the PPMC hosted job seeker focus groups as part of the work plan established with the American Job Center, Lincoln, Nebraska. The purpose of the focus groups was to engage with job seekers regarding their experience accessing services from the AJC.

Methodology

The AJC staff identified job seekers and posted flyers regarding available focus group times around the center. Individuals who indicated they were interested were sent a Zoom link invitation to participate in the focus group sessions. The facilitated focus group sessions were designed to identify AJC's effectiveness in service delivery and provide recommendations for future services beneficial to job seeker. Nine focus groups were conducted, and participants were asked five questions designed to capture the experience and knowledge of the attendees. Each session was approximately 30 – 45 minutes long. Participants were given a \$50 Amazon gift card to compensate for their time.

Summary of Responses

The job seekers stated that the Center staff they worked with were pleasant, polite, and seemed interested in helping them to get a job. The most helpful services provided by the Center included help with resumes, access to the resource room, job fair events, on-site interviewing sessions, and assistance with completing a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) application. Overall, the participants recognized that the Center does provide valuable assistance to job seekers needing additional services, such as access to a database of available jobs, help with filling out applications, and access to computers and printers.

The job seekers were largely unaware of the breadth of services available at the AJC. They had only been made aware that the AJC exists when applying for unemployment or by stumbling across information when seeking out employment information online or in the building.

Some mentioned the lengthy application process and accompanying wait time to determine what services they might be eligible for as a barrier. They indicated that they had spent quite a bit of time filling out paperwork on site and would like to have an answer regarding next steps more quickly. In addition, suggestions were made to engage in more in-depth questions up front in order to provide access to targeted services.

Analysis and Recommendations

- Address the lack of awareness of available services
 - Create simple marketing materials that provide job seekers with AJC service information
- Change perception of AJC by providing information about services offered and candidates available
- Utilize testimonial information to highlight value of AJC
- Identify ways that AJC provides assistance and what makes the Center unique
- Advertise AJC services such as job fairs, etc., more broadly than current methods
- Identify funding resources for marketing materials and methods that do not conflict with federal funding parameters
- Implement a system that can “blast out” opportunities for jobs to candidates easily and efficiently (like Handshake)
- Utilize computers in resource room as a testing site for businesses.
- Implement in-person training sessions to assist job seekers with not just resume writing and interview skills, but other skills needed to be successful in a job
- Streamline the initial application process, and schedule follow up to avoid any ambiguity regarding when job seekers can expect to hear back from the Center.

Attachment A: Secret Shopper Scenarios

1. Underemployed Single Parent

Shopper previously worked in the HR field in payroll and benefits. She has a high school diploma and started college classes for a culinary arts degree, however, did not complete the program. Due to substances abuse issues, she was unemployed for over a year and for the last 1½ years has been working in a call center full time. She is not happy working for the call center and wants to move into something new. She is single and has 2 kids. She has experienced homelessness in the past and wants to ensure she has financial security moving forward. She likes a fast-paced work environment and has an interest in evaluating a career as an EMT or Paramedic but is open to other professions. She has done a little research into the field but hasn't pursued it. She would like to know how to move into EMT profession and find a job that supports her interests. Shopper is looking for a career that can pay her more money so that she can take care of her children. She doesn't have a personal computer and is unable to pay for internet at home. She does have a cellphone, but it is difficult to search NEworks on that device. She needs access to a computer.

2. Recent High School Graduate

Shopper is the first person to leave home and attend college. He is a freshman and is an economics/music major but uncertain about a career path. He has a very large extended family living out of state. He has worked in the fast-food industry but doesn't want to continue with that work. He is concerned about his future and is concerned about paying back school debt. He has financial concerns. He is interested in having a part-time job in a business setting but is hoping to see if his music background could be used in job. He is willing to explore certifications or other training to have a higher paying job.

3. Person Experiencing Homelessness

Shopper is living out of his car. Lack of housing has directly affected his ability to work consistently. Staying in a job has been difficult due to his homeless situation. He wants a simple job where he can contribute to the organization. He has done custodial work and enjoys it. He needs at least a part-time job but desires full-time work that can secure him a permanent place to live. He has had stable housing over the last year during the Pandemic. He feels like he can now commit to a job and move to his own place.

4. Person Experiencing Homelessness

Shopper was laid off from his job 18 months ago and as a result lost his permanent housing. Since that time, he has relied on friends/family for a place to live. Lack of permanent housing and a sound vehicle has resulted in difficulty obtaining employment. He has been unable to solve his housing needs and moving around has created a distraction from being able to work. He is seeking full-time employment to secure permanent long-term housing and be able to pay all his living expenses. He previously worked as a welder and has an interest in woodworking. Richard wants stability and a job with benefits. He is worried that he is competing against younger workers. He currently has secured transportation to get to work.

5. Recently Displaced Worker

Shopper previously worked in a law office performing legal assistant type work. He was employed for 30 years until the firm downsized and he was laid off. He is not able to retire and needs to be employed full time. He has skills in writing and researching, however, is unsure how to translate these skills into a high demand job. Due to his age, it is difficult for him to be employed. He may need assistance in improving his computer skills- due to complex software systems, etc. He has no social media experience but understands that utilizing a LinkedIn account or other platforms could increase his ability to find work. His resume and interview skills are very rusty, and he needs skills in these areas. Does not necessarily want to return to a law firm and hopes that he can be retrained in a new field.

6. Recently Displaced Worker

Shopper was currently let go due to the company downsizing because of the Pandemic. He is not ready to stop working and is unable to retire- he needs a salary and benefits. He has worked retail fixing electronics. He has interest in science and STEM activities. He has been out of work for 3 months but is having difficulty getting employed due to his age. He must work 2 more years. He could benefit from resume writing assistance to ensure it meets 2021 expectations.

7. Person of Color

Shopper moved to the US 10 years ago from Thailand. She is a US citizen, but doesn't have a good support system due to her family being Thailand. She is a single mom which may make it difficult to work full time and attend training or school in the evening. She is working full time, but she struggles to figure how to take her interest and apply them to a job. She wants full-time employment with good benefits to care for her children. Depending on the job and training opportunities, she will need child care options/resources. She has a passion to work with refugees and immigrants in a non-profit organization. She doesn't know the system well and needs help understanding what skills or training might be needed to work in a non-profit organization.

8. Person of Color

Shopper was born in Thailand and moved to the United States in 2011. She graduated from college in Business from Thailand and wants to translate that degree into a degree or certificate here. She is unsure of where to reach out for resources related to getting a different job. She is a single mom and on her own, with family back in Thailand. She currently has a job in medical coding/billing; however, this does not meet her financial needs due to be single and have a child. She may need to take a second job to make ends meet. She wants to expand her knowledge and go into another field. Her dream is to be a therapist and she is interested in understanding what training and/or certifications are available for her to move in this direction. She must work full-time with benefits while training or attending classes at

night. She has done some research on how to get into the therapy field but doesn't know how to move forward. She wants to be employed where she can have promotional opportunities. She understands that the "therapy field" is very broad and is unsure what area to pursue.

9. English as a Second Language

Shopper moved from Thailand and has been in the United States for two years. She can read and write English but only speaks very little English. She completed her degree in Thailand in Business and Marketing 25 years ago. She recently completed her CNA but has not yet worked in the field. Moving forward she would like to advance to getting an associate degree and ultimately her bachelor's degree in Nursing. She is looking to work full time.

10. English as Second Language

Shopper is from Vietnam and has been in the United States for 4 years. She currently works as a freelance photographer in her own studio taking maternity, children, and family photos. She completed a business degree in Vietnam and has an interest in opening her own antique store and importing goods from Vietnam. Prior to being a photographer, she worked as an event officer for a company. She speaks little English and currently has two very small children at home that she takes care of. The money she earns from her photography is not enough to contribute to the needs of the family, so she wants fulltime, steady work in a business setting.

11. Veteran/Previously Incarcerated

Shopper served in the Navy and separated in the 1990's. In 2020, she was released from prison after seven years of being incarcerated. Upon her release, she entered work release and utilized the AJC to obtain employment. Her experience at the AJC was not favorable. She was left on her own to utilize the computer to determine information about job placement. She received no assistance, resources, or suggestions on training, etc. She explored NEworks on her own and did not receive

information about Veteran services. She has experience with clerical, janitorial, food service and manual labor jobs. She was previously employed but was unable to continue employment due to the physical demands of the job. She has been unemployed since January 2021 and is looking for part-time work with the option to be full-time. She is interested in a clerical/receptionist position and could use some assistance with computer skills, resuming writing and interview skills. She is unable to work in the food industry due to food allergies. Shopper would need transportation services to consistently work.

12. Veteran

Shopper is a critical care nurse who served many years as a military reservist. She became burned out in the field and did not want to work weekend hours that were required in the hospital setting. She wants to contribute by working part-time but is not necessarily interested in direct nursing. Her license has expired and if she works in that field it would require her attend a refresher course, which she is unsure of whether she wants to complete. However, she does have a lot of medical knowledge and experience that would be beneficial in a medical office, doctor's practice, or clinic. She needs help in thinking about translating her nursing skills into a part-time position that doesn't require her to have her nursing license. She needs to work Monday – Friday, part-time during the day because she helps take care of her aging parent. She also has an interest in reading, gardening and crafts which could translate into job possibilities. Shopper wants to remain active and engage outside of the home. She will need some brushing up on computer skills and resume writing.

13. Person with a Disability

Shopper obtained his GED and is currently anticipating starting college classes in the fall for culinary arts. His previous work experience has been in fast food, grocery stores, a call center, and retail that included sales work. He is interested in part-time work and health benefits would be good if available. Shopper currently has a mild mental disorder, Tourette syndrome and Crohn's disease. His Crohn's disease can be unpredictable requiring him to have access, when needed, to restroom facilities.

Shopper does have dysgraphia, which does make typing on the computer somewhat difficult. He does have a work history and is able to work in any work environment. Shopper has an updated resume, feels comfortable in interviews, and knows how to use the computer and Microsoft software.

14. Person with a Disability

Shopper will be engaging with the Workforce Center in hopes of obtaining a part-time job that may pay more than her current minimum wage job working in a grocery store. She has a 10-year work history but would like to do something different. Shopper traditionally has worked with a job coach who goes to work with her to keep her on task, however, she can work without having that assistance. She is interested in transitioning to a job in a more creative setting, such as a craft store or something along those lines. She does not drive so transportation assistance would be a helpful resource. In addition, she would like additional skills related to resume writing and interviewing.

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